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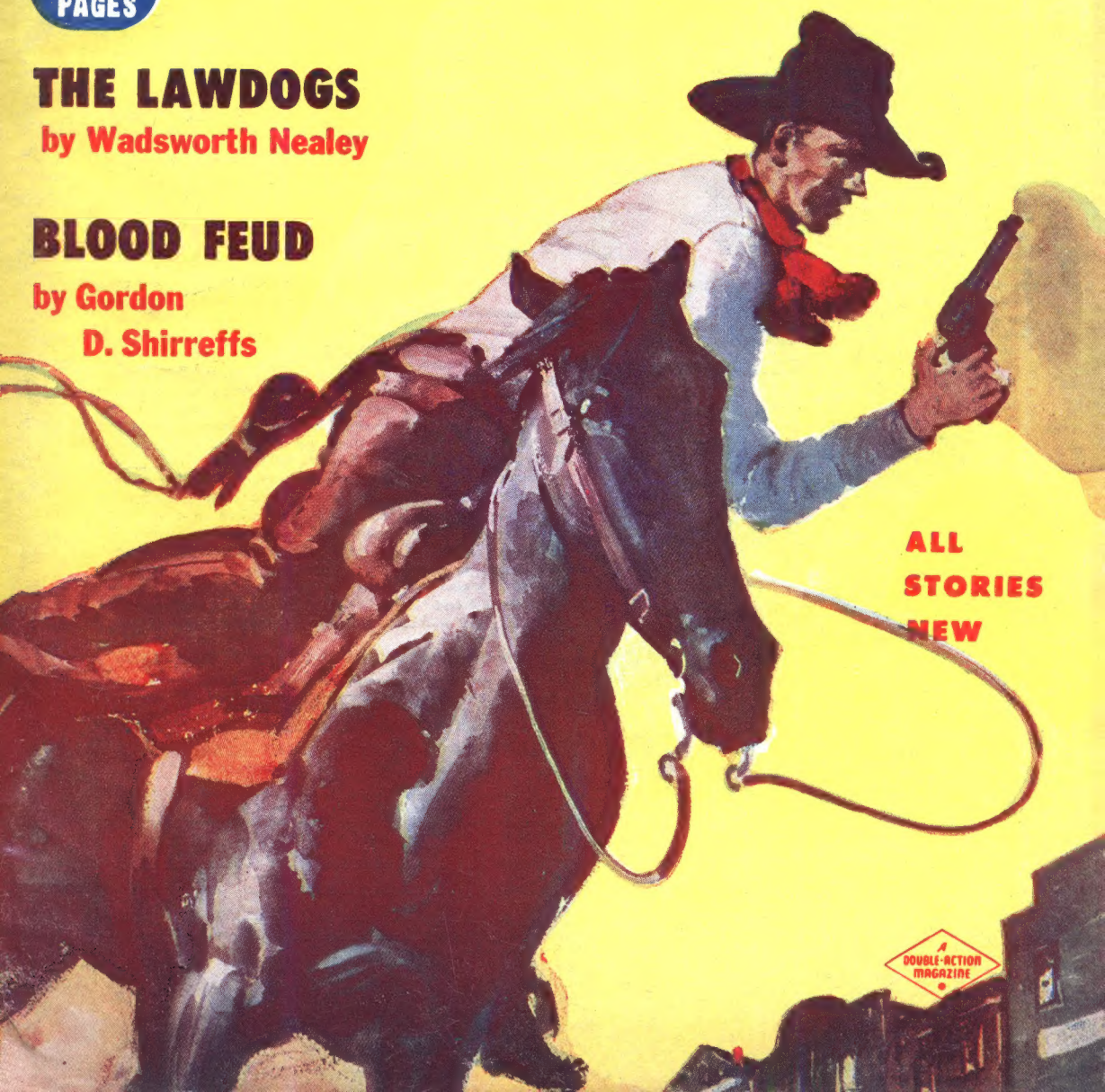

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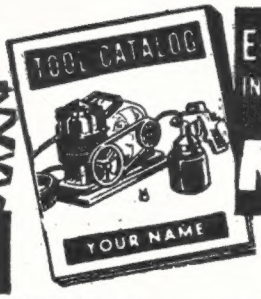

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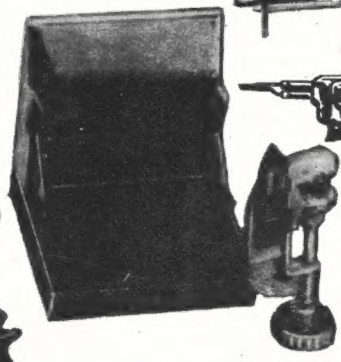

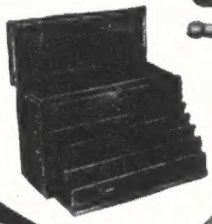

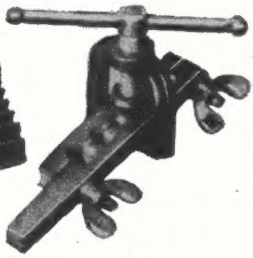

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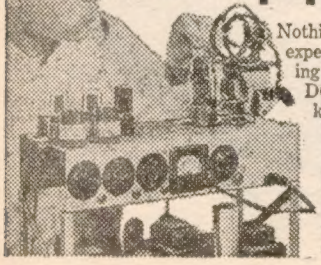

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Gil Hammitt's gun barked suddenly.

Gil Hammitt's idea, when they reached town, was to take off his badge, and work his way into the opposition. But Robert Sergeant, knowing the youngster's wild ways, wondered if what started as a masquerade might not develop into the real thing.

THE LAWDOGS

Marshal Sergeant novel

by WADSWORTH NEALEY

ACROSS THE arid flats, the heedless stars shimmered now and then upon the silent shadows of a ring-tailed cat, horned owl, chuckawalla, spotted skunk, diamond-back rattler and desert tortoise. At last the two riders stopped in the worn cattle-trail. Both were young, but a lifetime in the frontier southwest had dried them out like well-seasoned timber.

Each man had a U. S. Marshal's badge pinned to his dusty, perspiration-soaked shirt and a rope dallied over his single-rigged saddle where the split reins dangled. The resemblance ended there, for one was very blond and tall, his eyes gun-metal gray in a face that would have been handsome—if it could only have shown less sardonic humor. The other was medium-tall, compact, darkly serious, his brown eyes giving the impression of patient understanding.

"So that's Stagestop." The supple blond made a cigaret deftly, lit it, and flicked the burning match carelessly toward the town visible at the bottom of the rise.

"Yeh—and does my buckskin smell that watering-trough!"

"Am I your deputy for the time being—or shall I take over my new territory now?"

"That's up to you."

It certainly was. As he wearily sat gazing down at Stagestop, Robert Sergeant admitted to himself that he was doubtful about Gil Hammitt; but even when the Judge back at the County Seat had deputized the man, Sergeant had not voiced disapproval—simply because he knew he was naturally prejudiced against such a smooth gun-slick.

"Come out and say it, Bob; you don't trust me, even if I am Judge Klem's favorite nephew." Gil Hammitt smirked at his cigaret, as though the older Sergeant was handicapped by too settled opinions.

"I wouldn't say that."

"You're blaming me for being too quick on the draw. You're remembering that I've killed a few gunmen and gunfighters in self-defense, and have sown a few wild oats before deciding to settle down to the routine life of a Deputy United States Marshal."

"Don't be so suspicious, Gil."

"But my Uncle Klem wouldn't have pinned this badge on me, if you'd spoken up against me; he thinks your judgement's the best. He'd have sent you down here alone to tame Stagestop."

"You've got to stop being so touchy!"

There was a stubborn, steady insistence in Sergeant's exclamation that made Hammitt heave his cigaret away, and eye Sergeant for a moment. Then the pale orbs twinkled in their imitation of a blithe spirit. "All right, so I'm too thin-skinned for my own good, Bob. Until I get over that—if ever—maybe we better hide our badges."

"My badge remains in plain sight."

"Then I hadn't ought to be afriad to make mine a bulls-eye to my heart, either. You're proud of the piece of tin—but of course you draw the pay of a Marshal, while I only get the pay of a Deputy; but we're still both lawdogs to the citizens of Stagestop, aren't we?"

"We're lawdogs to anybody who hasn't any respect for what we represent."

"Do we play it smart or dumb?"

"You be yourself, and I'll be myself." Sergeant said. "All I know is that as soon as I hit town I'm going to contact the sheriff. After all, it was he who wrote to Judge Klem for help."

"As soon as I hit town I'm going to strain some alcohol through the sand in my throat, because I'm as thirsty as your horse." Gill Hammitt's own chestnut looked as dry as alkali.

Robert Sergeant gave the man beside him a long, slow look, started to speak, then pressed his cracked lips tightly together and spurred his high horse down the steep slope.

THEY PARTED just before reaching the first unpainted, false-front, weathered building—which was the combination jail and sheriff's quarters. In the gloomy, shapeless main street, a dog was chasing a ground squirrel through patches of orange-colored lamplight; it was so warm that animals walked. Dust and roistering noise hung suspended in saloon doorways, as if telling the stranger this was a cowtown roused from lethargy by the presence of end-of-roundup cowboys and cattle-sale cash.

"Have some redeye on me," Gil Hammitt suggested.

"You'd do better to drink and feed your horse. First thing you know, you'll think nothing of your badge, either."

"Tenderhearted, conscientious, Robert, worrying still." The tone was cynical. "Always think of your horse and your badge before yourself, don't you? Always willing to give free advice."

Sergeant started to dismount by the watering-trough before the sheriff's shack, but Hammitt dropped a sensitive hand on his sinewy wrist and said: "Why kill yourself for the chicken-feed this job pays? I mean, what does beating your brains and body over it, get you? Hell, all you have to with a lawbreaker, is shoot him before he does the same to you!"

"There are times when you should use your head instead of your gun, because human beings—good or bad—are still human beings."

Silence was golden, but Hammitt's thoughts were of silver dollars. He pulled his hand absently away and airily said: "Well, good luck to us both, Bob. *Hasta la vista, amigo.*" He liked to whistle but couldn't, on key; he rode off, trying.

Sergeant let the buckskin drink its fill, led it to the boardwalk and put an oat bag over its wet, eager nose; then he looked up into the lamplight that suddenly spotted him from an opening door. A man stood on the threshhold like an obscure silhouette, his legs resembling plier-handles, his sheriff's star glinting dully. A pair of steel-rimmed spectacles perched on the tip of

his snub-nose, as if he were so careful of them that he continually peered over their tops, so he wouldn't wear them out. Apparently he had heard the bucksin nicker.

"Ah see y'badge. Yuh th' feller Judge Klem sent?"

"Yeah; I'm Robert Sergeant. I want to take my horse to the livery stable. This is no place for him to spend the night."

"The liv'ry keeper heah is th' kind of hombre who would steal a hoss, then return for the sweat!" The sheriff's cackle was weirdly offkey and high-pitched, and seemed to fit his rickety, thin-limbed, watery-eyed, practically hairless figure. But his jaded vision missed little. "Ah have a clean stall out back that Y'can rent cheaper, Marshal. Come 'long—ah'll show yuh."

SERGEANT followed the oldster, then unsaddled, carefully examining the gelding for sores, lifting his heavy feet and inspecting the shod hooves.

"That'll be one gold cartwheel for as long as y'want t'stay," the sheriff said. "Five dollars in advance."

Sergeant paid.

"Thems split reins. Do conside'able ground-tyin', heh?"

Sergeant straightened lithely, looking to see if the old codger was trying to pump him or was just being sociably loquacious. But when the fellow approached the gelding and acted as only a true horse-lover could, Sergeant decided in his favor.

"Yuh rode all th' hot live-long day from the County Seat, heh?"

"And part of the night, Sheriff."

"Ice outa th' mountain streams yet?"

"All melted."

The sheriff cocked his head sidewise, like an inquisitive wren, then let his overly-thrifty thoughts get the better of him. "Yuh lookin' for a place t'eat an' sleep?"

"Yeah."

The little man's eyes narrowed. "Yuh got anythin' against town sheriffs that've been in office forty y'ars, an' ain't what they useta be? Too proud t'ask for advice?"

"I'll cooperate with you, sheriff."

"Uhuh?" The old man had a barking, raucous voice that belonged at a carnival midway.

But Sergeant was thick-skinned. "Uhuh."

"M'name's Alf Bailey, Marshal; shake!"

Sergeant accepted the fragile, blue-veined hand considerately, but found it wiry-tough, tenacious, calloused. Without further talk, Alf Bailey withdrew his hand, paced about creakily, shakily, then said: "It's long past suppertime in mah house. Y'better go across th' street to th' Chinaman's."

Sergeant agreed and walked out into the night, thinking: *I hope I was right in not protesting when Judge Klem pinned the badge on Gil Hammitt and swore him in. For all of our sakes—I sure hope so.*

HIS WHISTLING only a habit, anyway, Gil Hammitt stopped it as he pulled up before the brightest, biggest saloon, dismounted, looped the reins around the hitch-rail, and patted his hipshot chestnut. "A little something for me, Chesty, then I'll tend to you."

Impulsively, he removed the badge from over his heart, pocketed it, pushed through the swing doors smiling. He downed two quick drinks from a tiny glass and felt refreshingly exhilerated as they hit his empty stomach. He accepted his change in silver cartwheels, turned his back on the bartender, and looking over the premises, jingled the dollars in one long-fingered fist.

A pale, long-faced, nervous houseman was sitting at a nearby table playing Monte-Bank with himself. He

rolled his eyes toward the jingle-jangling coins until nothing but the whites showed, then called: "Hey, stranger, you a betting man?"

"I'll bet on myself any time."

"Then come over and lose your money!"

Hammitt obeyed casually, aware that the line of hard heads in big hats at the bar had turned to follow him. Pushing back his sombrero, he sat down and neatly stacked five silver dollars on the deal table.

The house-man had been so cunning for so long, that he now could have taken the part of a coyote in a play without using much make-up. He matched the five silver dollars with one gold piece, produced a new pack of cards, removed the 10s, 9s, and 8s of each suit, before shuffling the 40-card deck and offering it to Hammitt to cut. Then holding the cards face down he drew two from the bottom and placed this "bottom layout" face up on the table. He then took two cards from the top of the pack, still holding it face down, for the "top layout."

Hammitt made his five dollar bet official, then watched the banker turn the remainder of the pack face up; and since the top or "gate" card was of the same suit as cards in Hammitt's top and bottom layouts, the banker paid off.

"No luck for the house tonight, stranger. You now have a sawbuck—want to bet it all?"

"Yeah."

Hammitt won again, and still again; the crowd's excitement rising as his stack of cartwheels grew.

"You still feel lucky?" the house-man asked.

From the moment he had entered this place, Gil Hammitt had spotted the wandering, heavy-set, cigar-smoker in the frock coat and gaudy vest, who looked as though he were a Jack of all the trades that had lots of jack in them. The man stood with the crowd now around the table, thoughtfully spinning the cheroot in his sensual lips with a thumb and forefinger.

"Sure, I feel fine." Gil Hammitt grinned impishly.

He won again.

"You now got seventy bucks." The banker's face looked hard, sinister, under the green eyeshade. "You quitting?"

"Quit," advised a man who looked as if he had struggled hard to be a failure, "before the law of averages gets you."

"I'm not a quitter." Hammitt cocked a bright eye at the thick-set man who was now twirling his cigar furiously.

He won the $140; the thick-set man exchanged glances with the house-man. "Double or nothing," Hammitt said.

THE BANKER riffled his deck anew, his eyeshade low, his head lower. His nimble fingers touched the edge of the deck and produced two cards rapidly.

"You're supposed to deal from the bottom the first time," Hammitt said. "Try again."

The dealer's head snapped up and back, his face crimson. "Why damn your insulting soul, I—"

"Easy with the four-letter words mister!" Hammitt hardly seemed to move, but between one rapid spin of the thick-set man's cigar, he was upright with a sixshooter in his right hand, leveled down on the green eyeshade.

The crowd decided that Hammitt was right, and began muttering belligerently at the jittery house-man.

The thick-set man heaved his cigar into a spittoon, shouldered the mob out of his way and said: "Now just what's the trouble?"

Hammitt grinned. "Eye-shade, there, makes me nervous. You look like a respectable citizen; suppose you draw the cards."

"Listen, Mister, I'm Mon Crouzer. I own this place."

"So much the better, unless you want

your customers to doubt the honesty of your Monte-Bank game."

The thick-set man pulled down his gaudy vest, lifted his frock coat to sit down in the chair hastily vacated by his house-man, and deliberately drew four cards as Hammitt holstered his gun and sat down to gather in another pot—$280 this time.

"Have a drink on me," Mon Crouzer said. "I don't want you to leave nursing a grudge."

"All right."

The crowd dispersed. The duo advanced to the bar, Crouzer's deep voice amused and irritated as it inquired: "Your name?"

"Gil Hammitt."

"Stranger here?"

"Yeah."

"You're a nervy youngster."

"I watch out for myself."

"You're awfully fast with a gun; that could get you into trouble."

"Into trouble or out, it's better to be quick than dead."

Mon Crouzer had his bartender fetch the best liquid in stock. "Tell me—what do you do for a living?"

Hammitt up-ended his glass and rolled the 100-proof whiskey around on his tongue. "I try to avoid dull jobs, and to keep from boring myself to death."

- 2 -

IT WAS MID-DAY when Robert Sergeant, holding down the sheriff's office while Alf Bailey ate and rested, saw Gil Hammitt, freshly barbered and looking as cool as a mountain-stream, come striding across the rutted street.

"I see you removed your badge, Gil."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Just to make you more distrustful of me, maybe."

"You can be pretty reckless, sometimes."

Sergeant looked beyond the long, lean blond passing the threshold, to the sun-blistered town.

"Look," Hammitt was suddenly very earnest, "by concealing my badge and mixing with the riffraff up the street, I may have stumbled into something good." He explained what had happened last night.

"Something good for you—like winning $280 then losing it all again?"

"I didn't lose it; I spent it—and got my money's worth." Hammitt laughed gayly. "But that's beside the point. I'm in cahoots with the most powerful hombre in town. Mon Crouzer's hired me as his bodyguard at fifty bucks a week! Haw!"

"It won't be a laughing matter when and if Crouzer finds that badge on you."

"Aw, don't be a wet blanket! Mon Crouzer's the big wheel around which this territory turns. Saloon-dance halls, cattle buying and selling, freighting, the overland stage—you name it—he's got his finger in it. He thinks I'm a gun-slick on the prod and has big plans for me. Uh-haw!"

"Very funny." Sergeant glumly watched Hammitt produce a cigar, bite off the end between fine white teeth, and stick it in one corner of his rather weak mouth at a rakish angle.

"I don't hear you laughing."

Sergeant was about to tell the young fool he thought a thimble would fit over his curly head like a huge Mexican straw, when a tall girl carrying a clean, white napkin, came around the corner of the building and into the office.

"Here's your dinner, Marshal." She handed the tray to Sergeant, but gazed at Hammitt. "Grandpop told me to bring it."

Sergeant set the tray on the cluttered, rolltop desk. Hammitt gazed back at the girl, almost swallowing the cigar. If she was in her 20s, she was just barely in, and she had a sylph-like figure that even the gingham gown could not disguise. Her brown eyes were as lively as the bouncing blue-black lustrous hair pinned Paul Revere style behind her handsome head.

"Howdy-do ma'am." Hammitt jerked off his sombrero and bowed low.

Deliberately ignoring the fact that introductions were in order, Sergeant said: "Thank you, Miss Bailey."

The girl looked at Sergeant reproachfully, then smiling at Hammitt, left as quickly as she had come.

"Well," Hammitt inquired, "who's that?"

"The sheriff's little granddaughter, Ethel Bailey."

"Little? Why, man, she's as mature as they can get."

"She's no dancehall floozie, remember that!"

"Aha, now I get it!" Gil Hammitt's smile was frankly admiring. "And that's why you didn't introduce me."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Go introduce yourself to her; she encouraged you to."

"Well I'll be cussed if the old woman-hater isn't jealous!" Hammitt laughed gleefully, saluted a sloppy farewell, and sauntered away trailing strong cigar smoke.

WHEN ETHEL BAILEY brought Sergeant's dinner again, she lingered for awhile, watching him eat, then asked impulsively: "Why didn't you introduce me to Gil Hammitt, Saturday?"

"You know his name already!"

"He came to church yesterday and sang in the choir—so naturally we met." Her brown eyes stared Sergeant's down. "Since you two are old friends—I think you went out of your way to be rude day before yesterday."

Sergeant tried, with stolid silence, to concentrate on his food and drink; but he kept seeing Ethel standing on the threshold with the strong sun shining through her dress.

"My dear Grandfather talks too much—but you talk too little."

"Does Mr. Hammitt attain the happy medium?"

"Gil knows that a girl has a mind of her own." She braced her back in the doorway and turned her face toward the sun, squeezing her eyes half shut. "We found lots to talk about. Did you know he's quit drinking hard liquor because it makes his breath stink? Said he may even give up strong cigars next."

"Did he say anything about giving up Mon Crouzer's hired women?" Sergeant, pushing the tray aside, was surprised at the unchecked rush of his own words. "Probably not, because he's rotten inside; you mess around with him and you may live to regret it!"

"Why, Marshal, I never dreamed you could get excited about anything!"

"You're both being very foolish. Together you'll only make more trouble than you could make for yourselves, apart."

"Your tone," she snapped, "sounds like the tax collector's footsteps on the back porch. But you can't frighten me!"

He watched her snatch up the tray and march away. He was still standing there, staring out the door, when Alf Bailey came limping in, his face as gray as his spectacle frames, his voice as brittle as his old bones. "Let's unde'stan' one thing, Marshal, Yuh wear a badge—but y'can't arrest mah granddaughter's free spirit—see?"

"Yeah," Sergeant said.

AS THAT first week in Stage-stop passed and Alf Bailey made no objections about the constant visiting

between his granddaughter and Gil Hammitt, Sergeant told himself bluntly: *It's a gift Gil has of making everybody—including me—like him.*

Frequently Sergeant saw Hammitt and Crouzer ride out of town on legitimate business, presumably, followed by a rag-tag army of slack-mouthed, squinty-eyed, stupid-looking horsemen who wore polished sixshooters at their stiff hips.

Alf Bailey had no real evidence, but Sergeant listened often, while the garrulous rascal detailed the rumors from reluctant ranchers of the vicinity, who claimed they were bullied into selling cattle to Crouzer—at Crouzer's price. When individual ranchers tried to herd their own cows to the market at Railroad City—three hard driving days away—raiding rustlers robbed and slew them in the night.

"Crouzer's own road brand," Bailey continued, "is never rustled, night or day. Mebbe Crouzer's jus' lucky—because his Stage-stop-Railroad City coach gets robbed every so often. Usually when there's a special big shipment of money from the branch bank here to th' home back in Railroad City. We never used t'have s'much trouble up 'til five y'ars back, when Crouzer settled heah. As sheriff, ah been appealed to a lot lately, but there's more ground t'be covered now than mah y'ars can handle. It's tough enough f'me, jus' tryin' t'keep peace heah in town, where Crouzer ain't broke no laws so far.

"Lately, the mutterin' of the local ranchers against Crouzer has been increasin' t'violent growls! That's why ah wrote t'Jude Klem; ah don't want no range war on m'neck."

And Sergeant remembered again how useless it was to warn Gil about the rolling powder-keg that Crouzer represented. Sergeant had ridden about the nearby countryside some, trying to gather a little positive evidence; but most of the time, he had been forced to stick around the sheriff's office and fill in while the tired old man took long siestas. But one afternoon during the second week in town, Alf Bailey said: "That amigo of yours is practically Crouzer's shadow, now."

"Why do you call him my friend?" Sergeant sighed wearily. "Is it because you saw us ride into Stage-stop together?"

"M'eyes ain't what they useta be; but before Hammitt changed his shirt, ah could see two torn holes in th' left pocket—as if, mebbee, he'd worn a badge theah, an' torn it off." Bailey took time out to fill an odorous pipe and get it smoking furiously. "If Hammitt was a badge-wearer—then th' two of yuh came from th' same place—for th' same purpose."

Sergeant thought: *This oldster is nobody's fool.* He said: "Maybe that's why you let your granddaughter date Hammitt?"

"Mebbe. An' mebbe ah seen from th' start, that Hammitt, like yuh, is a feller with ideas of his own an' th' gumption t'use them."

Sergeant built a cigaret and fired it, looking warily over the match. At last Bailey said: "Every time th' local bank has sent money to Railroad City in th' past five y'ars, in th' boot of Crouzer's Concord, I've wanted t'get on m'hoss an' trail along."

Enjoying his smoke, Sergeant saw what the oldster meant. "Maybe I ought to do that. When does the next money shipment leave?"

"That's up t'th' bank; but usually, it doesn't keep cattle-sale and mortgage interest money around too long, because th' bank was robbed once, three y'ars ago."

"As sheriff, you ought to know about the shipment in advance."

"Usually, th' bank manager tells all the bigger depositors in advance, Crouzer included."

"Does Crouzer's stage carry the U.S. Mail, too?"

"Yeah; Crouzer has a good contract from th' Gove'nment."

"The man's certainly got a nose for

money." Sergeant wagged his head. "I wonder how he earned his first stake?"

"Now you're doin' some good wonderin'," the sheriff said.

THAT EVENING, when Sergeant watched Alf Bailey lock his office and followed him around to that part of the building that served as a dwelling, Ethel was sittting on the back porch in the gathering dusk.

"Supper ready?"

"Yes, Grandpop." She turned without a glance at Sergeant, and preceded them into the tidy kitchen.

After eating, Sergeant was sitting in the living-room playing a slow game of checkers with the deadly serious, fiercely-concentrating sheriff, when Gil Hammitt drove up in a rented rig to drive Ethel to a dance at the schoolhouse. The accustomed cordiality that the couple used with each other, as they entered the buggy and drove away, made Sergeant's temples throb. But Alf Bailey hardly moved even when Ethel called a gay goodby.

The sheriff's indifference to the Ethel-Gil situation kept Sergeant's mind completely off checkers.

"We might's well quit playin'," Bailey eventually said. "Yuh can hardly crown a king, let alone get a draw or a win."

"You're good and I'm not," Sergeant admitted, absently. "By the way, I've decided to leave town tomorrow. I'd like to ride around the district gathering evidence, if any. By the time I return, the bank should be ready to send its shipment out."

Bailey arose in sections, scooping the red-and-black wooden disks inside the checkerboard and folding it shut as he did so, then abruptly said: "If mah guess's right an Hammitt's y'deputy—what's the idee of me bein' kept in th' dark?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Because ah thought askin' yuh would be best, since we're sorta partners in law enforcement. Ah ain't insistin' yuh confide in meh y' unde'stan'; but if y'do, ah'll keep th' secret."

"All right." Looking at Bailey, it occurred to Sergeant that there should be as little friction as possible between them. "Gil Hammitt's Judge Klem's nephew. Gil has a substantial record as a gunfighter; he knew that some of those fights could have been avoided. He can be pretty proud when it comes to gun-slinging, and when he's drinking, arrogance replaces his common sense. He's killed at least four bullyboy gunmen, but each time has cleared himself of manslaughter charges in court. Lest he finally meet somebody faster on the draw than himself, he was talked into becoming Deputy U. S. Marshal of this territory, by his Uncle Klem. The concealing of his badge, while fraternizing with the Crouzer bunch, is his own idea."

"He's only twenty-three, Ethel told me. Sometimes the young outgrow wildness."

"Sure; I outgrew it myself. But the difference between Gil and most wild ones is that he has absolutely no fear of anything."

"That could get him into bad mischief," Bailey admitted.

"Then why do you let Ethel—"

"Suppose we stick to th' law, Marshal." The old eyes were cold, phlegmatic. "That's for us; romance is for kids."

DURING the long ten days spent riding alone between the far-spaced ranches of the territory around Stagestop, Sergeant found his innermost thoughts returning again and again to Ethel Bailey, as never before he had dreamed of a woman.

It was a country made to order for meditation, its almost completely unbroken wilderness being like a huge sandbox under the lonely clouds. There was bleak, brooding grandeur in the distant mountain range that crept along the thin-aired horizon like coppery savages of a dead era.

Some nights Sergeant spent at isolated ranches far off the trail, trying to get information from suspicious, laconic men who had put up too long already, with one old lawdog who wasn't very useful to them. There was little time for reveries then; but when he made camp in the wilderness alone, when he lay supine between blankets with his head on his pillowed saddle, his eyes reflecting the twinkling stars and the sounds and smells of the desert close around him, Sergeant saw Ethel's glowing face, felt the firm softness of her body and heard the music of her voice.

The vision made him irritable, for it showed only the virtues of the girl, and none of the faults. *I'm a wishful-thinking jackass,* he scolded himself. But night after night, the female vision refused to disappear.

Sometimes, even the hot mid-day sun, the gruff ranchmen, the ceaseless dredging for information, failed to erase Ethel from his haunted mind. He tried to forget her, too. Whenever the thin, faded, tart-tongued wife of a rancher no longer young, argued with him about the inadequacies of man—Sergeant reminded himself that this was the way Ethel Bailey could eventually turn out, too. He even found himself occasionally making cutting answers to the sharp, nagging questions these old battle-axes threw at him. He was glad when the time came for him to return to Stagestop, even though his expedition had been a failure.

- 3 -

WHEN GIL HAMMITT went into the smoke-filled room behind the *Red Garter Saloon - Dance Hall* that served as an office, Mon Crouzer said: "I'm tied to this desk today, but I want you to visit local rancher, Quentin Ross, who's got fifty head of she-stuff I'd like to add to that 200-head herd we're trailing to Railroad City. I want you to buy them cheap."

"You do?"

"I offered Ross $25 a head two months ago. He laughed at me and said he'd drive the cows to market himself, before accepting it. He tried, too—but lost every head to rustlers, and got shot at." Crouzer jerked the dollar cigar from his mouth and smiled wetly, his eyes dry and hard. "I don't like to be laughed at, Gil; offer Ross fifteen a head."

"I'll see Ross alone."

"You'll take Crazy-legs Gaston and Bull Dawson with you, because Ross is short-tempered."

"I'm your bodyguard. Are Crazy-legs and Dawson, mine?"

"Don't be so damned sure of yourself!" Crouzer pointed the cigar like an exclamation point. "I do the thinking for men in my employ—and they do as they're told."

"They do?" Hammitt moved indolently nearer the desk, only the gray metallic glitter of his eyes giving away the internal passions that lashed his soul. "Well, don't you snarl at me, Crouzer."

"I guess the heat's got me, Gil." Crouzer spoke softly, but no longer carried a big stick. "Bull Dawson is all muscle and no brain; Crazy-legs is too quick on the draw—to hear him tell it. Still, I hope you'll take them along, if only to get them out of my hair for awhile?"

"That's better," Hammitt said.

"Three may be better than one," Crouzer said, "because that two-gun Marshal, Robert Sergeant, is out of town snooping around. What the hell's he here for, anyway? We've got a sheriff, haven't we?"

Hammitt walked out into the saloon without answering, and the absence of the late-sleeping dancehall girls made him think of Ethel, who, unlike them, retired early and arose early. He told himself: *I'm good-time Gil, full of the yen to marry and settle down. Wouldn't*

that surprise Sergeant, now! Human existence wasn't easy. Every man had to find his own niche, Gil supposed. Even men like Robert Sergeant, who didn't want the easy things, who wanted only to be on their own.

He beckoned to Crazy-legs Gaston and Bull Dawson as he passed the bar. They put down their empty glasses and followed him outside—the first an elongated, jittery fellow who looked and walked like a wobbly-legged skeleton; the second a battle-scarred, broken-toothed hulk who looked like twin Chimpanzees, and displayed all the intelligence as a kindergartener who had flunked in blocks and sandpile. They mounted their horses and followed him north, their big hats pulled low against the bright sun.

The Ross ranchhouse sat like a wind-sheared bush near the mouth of Abrasive Pass, where the wind blew uphill from left to right with such steady force that the man on either side of Hammitt tried to hide behind his horse's neck.

"I'll do all the talking," Hammitt said; "remember that."

"Yup," said Bull Dawson.

"And if your tongue don't work, maybe this will." Crazy-legs Gaston, unsmiling, rattled bony fingers against the gun at his hip.

"You'll keep your gun sheathed," Hammitt warned.

A WORK-WORN couple were standing on the front porch regarding them with silent hostility as they rode into the yard. Gil touched his hatbrim for the woman, and said, "Howdy Ross."

Ross was the man who, on Hammitt's first night in Stagestop, had said in the *Red Garter,* "Quit, before the law of averages gets you." That was the night Gil had won $280. Ross was obviously a Jack of all the trades that had little or no jack in them, which was probably why he seemed bitter, perpetually angry. His stony features and solid, chunky physique, seemed to emphasize the rebellious blowing of his unbarbered red hair. With intrepid stubbornness he stepped in front of his little wife and inquired: "What do you want?"

"To buy some cows, if you have any for sale." Hammitt leaned forward and folded his arms on his saddlehorn.

"Mon Crouzer sent you?"

Hammitt nodded.

Ross swung around and onto the porch, pushed his wife into the kitchen with one hand and grabbed a rifle standing there, with the other. "Get off my property!" He swung the rifle up.

"You see what I mean, Hammitt?" Crazy legs said.

"Shuddup," Gil said.

The emotion showing in Ross' face told Hammitt it would be useless to argue. He turned his horse against Bull Dawson's and herded it south—then realized that Crazy-legs was not following.

Then the voice of Crazy-legs Gaston, crackled dryly: "Drop that rifle, Ross!"

Hammitt turned in the saddle, interpreting Crazy-leg's relaxed slump before Ross could. As the thin man's claw-like hand sneaked for his six-shooter, Hammitt's own revolver appeared, blasted once, and sent Crazy-leg's Colt flying from his hand, its barrel broken. Meanwhile, the much slower Ross had got his rife aimed, the trigger pulled—but in his hurry shot wild.

Pointing his left hand at Dawson, Hammitt warned, "Keep out of this, Bull!"

Dawson growled, but sat with indecision on his spooked mount.

Turning his chestnut so sharply that the animal squealed as it was spurred forward, Hammitt drove the horse broadside against Quentin Ross, sending the rancher flying in one direction and the rifle in another.

Hammitt slid from his saddle and

hauled Crazy-legs out of his, just as the thin man began hauling at a rifle in the scabbard.

"We've had enough shooting," Hammitt said.

Mrs. Ross ran to her husband and helped him off the ground, while Hammitt collected Ross' rifle. Ross was holding the right shoulder upon which he had been dumped so heavily. He seemed dazed with shock. Hammitt approached the couple and said: "I'm sorry I had to ram you with my horse, Ross, but you were trying to kill me; let's see that shoulder."

The clavicle was badly broken. Hammitt applied emergency first aid, then took the man into the ranchhouse and had his wife prepare strong coffee. As he was leaving them, he said: "I'll send the doctor up from Stage-stop."

Crazy-legs Gaston, remounted now, was cursing Bull Dawson in English and Spanish. Stepping into his own saddle, Hammitt looked at the befuddled Dawson, then told Crazy-legs: "You should be praying instead of cursing, because I could have shot *you* instead of your gun."

WHEN ROBERT SERGEANT returned to Stagestop he found Sheriff Bailey working at the old roll-top desk; but what surprised Sergeant was that the old man was not smoking his beloved pipe. Pipe and tobacco lay on the desk as if forgotten. A strange thing indeed.

"Glad y'back." Alf Bailey shook hands. "Get any evidence against Crouzer?"

"No." Sergeant saw the new lines of worry in the bald old skull and wondered what was wrong now. He gave the details of his expedition, such as they were.

"It's about as ah expected, Marshal." And then Alf Bailey gave a hint of what was worrying him. "The date of the bank's money shipment north has been set. Crouzer, as one of the biggest depositors, has been told; I wish the bank manager hadn't done that. Maybe Crouzer's too big for all of us. Maybe it's folly t'buck him."

"I wouldn't say so."

"Ah know y'wouldn't." The sheriff looked more depressed than ever. "Well, you're th' one has t'ride guard on th' Concord when it pulls out with all that cash in its boot."

"I'll be ready when the time comes."

Alf Bailey picked up pipe and tobacco, then put them back down. "Ah can't even smoke, Marshal. Why? Well, ah don't mind tellin' yuh that every dollar ah've saved up through the long y'ars is ridin' t'Railroad City on Crouzer's stage. I'm scared t'leave th' money here in th' local bank—because Crouzer's been gettin' bolder lately. He might rob th' bank. Truth is, ah'm scared, no matter what ah do."

"You're old and tired; that's all. You ought to retire."

"Ah can't, until Ethel gets settled down." Bailey fished a huge pocket watch forth, looked at it, inserted a key in its back wound it, before putting it away again. "Time t'eat supper. C'mon."

Sergeant flipped his warbag over one shoulder and followed the old man into the kitchen, where they ate in almost complete silence until the sheriff got up and wandered off upstairs to his bedroom, complaining that he didn't feel too well. Ethel Bailey arose from the table, too, and said, "You want anything more, Marshal?"

He searched for affection and warmness in her tone, but couldn't find any. He felt awkward as he said, "No, thanks."

"You've been ten days on the trail."

"You counted them?"

"No, Grandpop did."

"I could have stayed here for all the good my journey did."

The lamp, with neatly-trimmed wick, flickered on the table. Clean towels were waiting at the sink for him to take to his room. He always marvelled at

what an excellent housekeeper this girl was. He wanted to tell her he meant to take a tub into the barn and give himself a sponge bath, but gradually he noticed that her eyes and hands kept caressing a new blue-silk dress that fitted her like a glove. When he didn't speak, she did: "Don't you like my dress?"

"It's pretty. You make it?"

"Yes, but Gil bought the material. Gil, unlike most men, is very thoughtful."

THE BATH did not wash him of ment made him ashamed, for he had never even thought of buying Ethel anything. For that matter, he wouldn't have known what to buy her, anyway.

"Gil is the most attentive man I've ever known. I feel flattered."

"Gil has a gift for getting along with people, all right," Sergeant admitted.

"That's what you think, while you were gone he ran Quentin Ross down with his horse and broke Mr. Ross' shoulder. Grandpop's very upset, and says Gil gave me this dress as a peace offering—but that's not true!"

So Gil's overstepped himself already! Although he had been expecting this, Sergeant could not help feeling as though he had been kicked in the groin. "How did it happen?"

Ethel explained, as Hammitt had confessed it to her. "And Ross' rancher friends are angry at Grandpop, because he arrested neither Gil nor Crazy-legs, nor Bull Dawson. Grandpop's afraid it may be the start of a range war."

Now, Sergeant thought, *Gil is branded as one of Crouzer's hired hoodlums*. He said, his voice tired and bleak: "I was afraid of this."

Ethel stared at him, as if unable to comprehend his disloyalty. "Gil's not to blame; he apologized to Ross and offered to do the same to Ross' friends."

"Sure, he offered to close the barn door after the horses had escaped." His clipped words were meant to be bluntly shocking. "And now he's put a blue dress on you so you'll look beautiful in the gutter he drags you to. He appears to be good for two things—good for nothing and no good!"

Her eyes and her chin lifted and held firm. "Gil's no guttersnipe!"

"That's what you *feel*; but what do you actually *know*?"

"Just this! If you're really a man and not a mouse, if you're a bulwark and not just a fair-weather friend—you can save Gil!"

"Me? How?"

"You can talk him into pinning his Deputy U. S. Marshal's badge back on his shirt, teaming up with you, and just bluntly arresting Crouzer and putting the whole Crouzer mob into jail. Gil's too proud to do it that way himself now, since he admits he bragged to you how well he was going to handle things on his own."

"He seems to have admitted many things to you—but I'm not his guardian-angel."

"We all want to tame the wild west, don't we? We all want to live in freedom and peace, don't we?" There was a quiet faith in her every word that did not sound like abstract preaching. "You're the only man in the world that Gil really respects—simply because he knows you're even faster on the draw than he is. And that's pretty fast! If you handle it right, he'll listen to you. You can't be so bull-headed stubborn you'd let him ruin himself—and perhaps all of us—over what, actually, is a simple misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding? Maybe you're the one misunderstands?"

"That isn't important. What's important is that I know you always have, and always will be able to look out for yourself—and that Gil, for all his great, intrepid bravado, is actually a misplace cog in this world."

"You're speaking through blind intuition," he said huskily.

"Bob." She moved so close to him that the smell of her hair unhinged his thoughts, and she smiled up at him as if there was no wall between them. "You'll try to help Gil, won't you? It wouldn't be like you to let Judge Klem down."

He looked at her, realizing she had called him by his first name for the very first time. He tried to detect female calculation in her—the design to wrap him around her will. He went to the sink and pumped two buckets full of water, threw the towels over one shoulder and started for the barn and a bath, saying as he did so: "No, it wouldn't be like me to let Judge Klem down."

THE BATH did not wash him of the feeling that he was being used by Ethel Bailey; after it, he walked upstreet to the *Red Garter,* anyway, getting more sour with every step he took. He mentally lambasted Gil Hammitt as a fool, who would consider any sensible advice about quitting his present association with Crouzer simply as a request to run away.

He took perhaps three strides on Main Street when something made him turn and he saw the kicking horse before the sheriff's office, and a light that came through the window to the boardwalk. Wondering why the old man had gone from his bedroom to his office while Sergeant was taking the spunge bath, made Sergeant retrace his steps. In the shadows beyond the lamplight, he looked into the front window and saw that Alf Bailey had a bulky, wide-backed visitor—Mon Crouzer! Moreover, Bailey had filled his pipe with tobacco and was now accepting a light from a match in Crouzer's steady hand.

Astonished, Sergeant remained motionless a moment, then wheeled around and resumed his up-street march, thinking: *The old man believes, no doubt, that I've gone to bed after my bath. Is that what he was waiting for? Was that meeting with Crouzer pre-arranged?*

Sergeant could not figure it out, knowing how bitterly the two men detested each other. Still, it was odd that the old sheriff hadn't at least warned the three culprits who had got into trouble on Quentin Ross' land. *Maybe,* he thought, *I really am dumb, and don't know half what's going on around here.*

But he kept walking stubbornly, knowing that he could only tackle one thing at a time. When he reached the *Red Garter,* he pushed open the batwing doors and quickly entered. searching out Gil Hammitt.

SHAKING the match out, and dropping it in the spittoon by the rolltop desk, Mon Crouzer watched while the old sheriff got his pipe smoking like a steam engine. Crouzer's look was sharp, as though he were looking at new money or human reactions that he had anticipated far in advance. He smiled, produced a big cigar, got it going, and said, "I was surprised when Hammitt told me you wanted to see me here."

"Ah'm worried about that money shipment, north. Some of mah own money will be aboard."

"My stage has been held up before. Why don't you play safe and leave your money in the local bank. You're not rich."

"Ah have enough money t'invest in somethin' good. Say a small interest in your Stagestop-Railroad City haul."

"You're serious?"

"Sure. Ah figure with Marshal Sergeant ridin' shotgun guard, no holdups would occur—and we'd all make money."

"The two-gun Marshal a shotgun guard?" Crouzer hauled the cigar from his thick lips and observed the tip for a second, then chuckled. "Now I know you're kidding."

"Yuh do?"

"You're getting old, Alf. Too old."

"Ah am?" The words were unusually harsh.

"No offense meant, Alf. We all get too old—if we live long enough." Crouzer carefully flicked the long ash from his cigar. "By the way, is it really true that Sergeant and Hammitt rode into town together?"

Alf Bailey neither used nor recognized subtlety. He spit out one word with a mouthful of smoke: "Yeah."

It's amazing, Crouzer thought, *how much useful information a man can collect by just pretending he has it already!* He had heard rumors, and had suspected that there might be some connection between his newest bodyguard and the two-gun Marshal. But even though he now knew it to be true, he would have to take Hammitt's hair-trigger temper into consideration—the young man could be dangerous when on the prod. He threw his partly-smoked cigar into the spittoon with a resounding splash. "Let's be frank, Sheriff; you want to come in with me because you're afraid of me."

"Get out!" Alf Bailey pushed himself from his old swivel-chair, his pipe dropping from his mouth to the floor.

"Remember, you invited me here." Crouzer spoke soothingly; bending down, he retrieved the pipe and handed it over in a sort of pacifying gesture.

"Yeh, but now ah figure it was a mistake. Ah figure ah couldn't be a business associate of somebody I'd be fightin' with all th' time. An' ah figure mah money will reach Railroad City safe, with Marshal Sergeant ridin' herd on y'Concord."

"You're quite a figurer for a man your age."

THE SHERIFF knocked the dottle from his pipe into the spittoon.

"But did it ever occur to you," Crouzer said casually, "that six or seven holdup artists wouldn't be afraid of one U. S. Marshal?"

"How do y'know th' number of those bandits?" Bailey threw the words like knives.

"I'm just speaking theoretically, Sheriff; I'm just raising the question about the possibility of a holdup. I can't guarantee there won't be."

"No?" Bailey arched his almost invisible brows mockingly. Being a straightforward man, used to the routine of honesty and frankness, he felt uneasy in the face of veiled threats, half-truths, and innuendos.

"No." Crouzer repeated.

"You're a baldfaced liar!" The lamplight, glinting off Bailey's polished spectacles, gave him a particularly tough appearance. "You're a beater round th' bush! Ah offered t'buy into y'stage business jus' t'get y'reactions. Ah got 'em!"

"No you didn't. You were scared, and still are." Crouzer's cordiality vanished. "But I'll make a deal with you. If my stage is robbed, I'll refund every dollar you lose thereby—if you can guarantee to me that the two-gun Marshal will mind his own business and return to where he came from?"

"It was me who asked him t'come heah." Alf Bailey sounded as if he was tired arguing with a man who regarded human life as meaningless—and that such a man was unworthy of life. "As sheriff of Stagestop ah have always encouraged law an' order—an' ah'm too old t'change. If y'want t'encourage violence, that's y'funeral. Goodbye!"

Without another word or look Mon Crouzer left.

- 4 -

THE MINUTE Marshal Sergeant pushed into the *Red Garter,* he spotted the high-shouldered back of Gil Hammitt seated at a card table with Crazy-legs Gaston and Bull Dawson—two rascals who had been de-

scribed to Sergeant in detail by Gil himself.

Knowing he was walking a dynamite fuse, Sergeant went to the bar, ordered a drink, and without lifting it to his lips, studied the room behind him from the bar mirror.

Gil, sombrero pushed back, high heels hooked upon the rungs of his chair, was laughing as he watched Crazy-legs with a pack of cards, trying to explain the simple rules of Montebank to a confused Bull Dawson. Sergeant knew Gil would have looked the same, probably, if violent death itself, were staring him in the face. Hammitt like most reckless youth, if afraid of anything at all was afraid of solitude. Afraid to be alone with himself...

Sergeant twisted the glass around and around on the bar. This man was the nephew of his best friend; this man was a Deputy U. S. Marshal with the badge of authority hidden away.

Suddenly, from the mirror, Sergeant saw Hammitt look up, frown, get up, and come casually toward the bar. When Gil's eyes got close enough to see, Sergeant thought: *He thinks I've come here about the row at Ross' place. He thinks I've come for his badge.*

"Howdy, pard." Gil's words were friendly, but his tone was not. "What's eating your restless conscience now?"

"This." Sergeant lifted his small glass and looked up at the youngster beside him. "Whiskey always gives me the grandfather of all headaches."

"That's because you're not a drinking man. How come you're not sticking to coffee?"

"I've been out of town for ten days trying to get something on Crouzer; I didn't."

"Ethel told me you were out of town." Hammitt ordered a drink for himself and swallowed it fast. "She didn't know why or where. I gathered her Grandfather did—but he wouldn't talk."

Sergeant sipped his drink, then began to laugh quietly, searching for the puzzlement that finally came into Hammitt's eyes.

"What're you laughing for?" Gil asked.

"The first night we hit town, you said the first thing you were going to do was strain some alcohol through the dust in your throat. Well, now you've got me doing it."

"But you're still wearing your badge."

"Yeah, sure. I haven't given up on the idea of making this a more peaceful town for the old sheriff."

"Uncle Klem told me many times that you never gave up on anything in your life." Gil's voice was respectful and sincere. "So I'm glad you're staying with it."

"Even if it means Alf Bailey and I have to fight Crouzer—and you?"

"My Uncle Klem would never forgive either of us, if we fought each other—with guns." There was a small yet dangerous smile on Hammitt's wide, ironic mouth. "And, outside of Bull Dawson, I believe that's the only way the Crouzer crowd knows how to fight."

SERGEANT told Hammitt of the pending shipment of money, including Alf Bailey's, to Railroad City, and of the sheriff's fear that Crouzer would order the stage robbed in some dark, lonely place. He told Hammitt everything—except the fact that Alf Bailey and Crouzer were at this very moment, together.

"Crouzer's god is money." Hammitt slapped his empty glass on the bar, eyeing the bartender who was at the far end. "He'll do anything to get more than he's got already—which is plenty. You better order that money shipment stopped, and change your mind about shadowing the stage north."

"I could order the money shipment postponed, but I couldn't postpone my intentions of riding the coach trail to Railroad City—or in the direction thereof."

"Then you better get out of here."

"Will you come with me?"

"I don't run away from anything, or seek protection in numbers."

"You'd fight me and Ethel's Grandfather?"

"No, I wouldn't; but I got into this thing my own way, and I'm not running away from it."

"Crouzer will see to that. So long as you accept his fifty bucks a week, he owns you body and soul—as he owns all the others."

"Crouzer doesn't own any part of me." Hammitt's voice was deadly flat. "I've told him so, myself."

"But did you believe it when you said it?" Sergeant spoke very slowly, as if considering every word. "Crouzer's made a stooge out of you already. When you had that trouble with Ross, everybody in this territory knew you bore Crouzer's brand. Haven't you seen the towns-people pointing at you? Haven't you heard them whispering behind your back? Don't you know you're a marked man?"

The knuckles of Hammitt's right hand grew white near the butt of his gun. "So you know about that, too." The young voice was harsh from the effort of self-control.

"Yeah."

"Maybe Crouzer did know what he was running me into, but nobody seems to know I wasn't to blame for what happened. In fact, if I hadn't done what I did—there would've been a shooting."

"All right, let's agree you prevented that shooting. What makes you think you'll prevent another?"

Hammitt gave Sergeant a quick, searching look, then slid his glass down the bar. "Well, what is on your mind?"

"You! Quit this fifty dollar a week job. Pin your badge back where it belongs. If you come over to Bailey and me, you won't be coming to the side with the biggest numbers of men; you won't be getting fifty a week, either. You'll only be getting your deputy's pay—but you'll be your own man."

"Tell me something, Bob." Hammitt caught the re-filled glass that the bartender slid to him. "Is this your idea—or Ethel's?"

THE ABRUPT question struck Sergeant dumb.

"Answer me!"

"It's my idea, entirely," Sergeant lied. "And speaking of Ethel, she told me you promised her you'd leave alcohol alone."

"Well, you spoke the truth there." Hammitt up-ended his glass and spilled the liquid on the bar. "I'd forgotten I'd promised her. She thinks I need a keeper—and so do you. She's so cussed good and decent herself, it would seem perfectly natural for her to send a good, decent guy into this hell-hole to rescue me and help her reform me. And it's a task to suit your self-sacrificing, noble character, too, isn't it? But you've made a mistake—both of you. If, for the first time in your life, you'd come to me and admitted you needed help for yourself—I'd have gone out of here with you. But that's the last thing you'd ever admit. Noble, self-sacrificing characters give me a pain in the neck. You, particularly."

Sergeant started to speak.

Hammitt broke the empty liquor glass between the fingers of his left hand. "Please—no more preaching, Bob; I'm keeping my fifty per week job. See you around. S'long."

The dismay of his failure built up like an iceberg within Sergeant. "All right, keep your fifty per week. Go on and break your promise to Ethel again, too. I'd hoped—with Judge Klem, and Ethel, too—that you could be salvaged from slow poison, fast women, gambling and guns—but it's a vain hope!"

Quicker than thought, Hammitt swept Sergeant's near full glass up and around. Choking as the acrid fumes and fiery liquid hit him full in the face, Sergeant shifted his feet, pivoted and brought a left hook smashing against Hammitt's lean jaw. Almost before the

sound of bone meeting bone and flesh meeting flesh, Hammitt hit the floor, spraying sawdust all around.

The piano that had been going lickety-split in one corner of the big room, stopped abruptly; so did the buzz of conversation; so did the milling crowd. Hammitt's right hand went for his gun, not knowing it had slid from the holster and across the floor. Crazy-legs Gaston pushed through the crowd and came out with his legs braced, his trigger-finger twitching.

"Stay out of my business, Crazy-legs!" Hammitt staggered erect as he spoke, moving as a cat moves, and toward Sergeant—and the sound of flesh and bone against flesh and bone resumed, as if encouraged by the excited crowd.

Sergeant landed the fewer blows, but they were better planted and heavier. Gil concentrated on hammering his head, but he, himself, concentrated on Hammitt's slender slats. He lacked Hammitt's height, reach, and was ten years older; but he weighed about the same, and his weight was more compactly distributed. He lost the sense of time; blood appeared in his mouth, and his left eye began to close, but he knew his own blows to the midsection were hurting Gil. He shook off Gil's trip-hammer blows and kept moving forward, step by little step, head down, eyes up.

Gil circled like a fly around a bald man's head, very nimble, very quick and sharp, in and quickly out. The next time Gil came in, Sergeant had the movement timed; and his left hand, up to the wrist, buried savagely into Gil's stomach and almost seemed to end up against his spine.

GIL'S BACK hit the sawdust again, sending it spraying like sulphur; from the way he skidded along and into the legs of men who were too slow getting out of the way, Sergeant knew the fight was over. Breathing heavily, he looked down on his work, feeling no pride in it, feeling nothing but shame for it. After a long time, when nobody else did anything, he went over and tried to help Gil up.

"Look—Bob," Gil finally said. "let—me—pick—myself—up—will you?"

Sergeant did so, then tried to shake hands.

"Go away," Gil said. "And don't come back."

"All right. All right!" His spirit every bit as weary as his flesh, Sergeant started moving through the slow-breaking crowd, toward the exit. But Crazy-legs Gaston was standing before the bat-wing doors, his scowl and his slump pronounced, his whiskey breath strong enough to start a windjammer in a seascape. When he would not move, Sergeant gave him a stiff-armed shove.

The human-skeleton was flung back, cursing. Sergeant didn't listen, or look around; he just stood there waiting for the crowd that had bunched again, to get away from the exit.

All at once a hurled chair thudded against Sergeant's spine, sending him headlong into the crowd—just as gunshot, quickly followed by another, roared like thunder in that hectic room. When Sergeant got turned around, half lifted by the crowd, he saw Crazy-legs Gaston, smoking gun still in hand, sitting like a scarecrow on the floor.

Sergeant craned his neck toward Hammitt, knowing all at once, that it had been Gil who had thrown the chair at him. Gil was already flicking the empty shell from his sixshooter, inserting a full one, closing the cylinder and leathering the gun, looking terribly sad and beaten up. "You can't push a killer like Crazy-legs and then turn your back on him—unless you want to commit suicide!"

Sergeant said: "I hope it will never be suicide to turn my back on you." He thought: *Gil saved my life, but all Crouzer will notice is that he killed Crazy-legs. What the townspeople will think, I have no idea. Maybe they'll feel as crazy and mixed-up as Gil acts.*

A voice broke into Sergeant's thoughts with: "What's the meaning of this, Hammitt?"

Sergeant swiveled his neck around again, as Mon Crouzer, just inside the batwing doors, swung his eyes from the dead gunman to Gil Hammitt.

Loosening his pants belt from his sore middle, Hammitt said: "Maybe you can tell me."

"I can tell you this. In this town you can get hung for shooting a man in the side of the head!"

"Who'll lead the necktie party? You?" The dangerous passion in Hammitt's eyes, worked its way into his words.

Taking Sergeant by the arm, and beckoning to Hammitt, Crouzer said without any feeling at all, "Come out back, both of you; this room is not private enough for what I've got to say."

He was obeyed, and in his office, he turned on Hammitt with a shrewd, knowing look. "Old Alf Bailey told me about you two being in the law together and in cahoots against me."

"I bet you're lying, as usual." For that brief sentence the old devil-may-care spirit was in Hammitt again.

There was an awkward pause, while Crouzer's agate eyes shifted from one lawdog to the other in secret summation. Finally he re-opened the door he had just closed, and said: "You can consider that you have worked so far this week for nothing but the experience, Hammitt. I don't pay lawdogs fifty dollars a week for anything, any time."

WHEN SERGEANT returned to his own room he found the rest of the Bailey building dark. He got ready for bed and then thought a cold-water shave might relieve the soreness of his face; but when he looked in the mirror above his washbasin he decided his lumped, discolored face and eye would be better for an untouched night's rest. But he couldn't sleep much, what with knowing that his wounds had settled nothing between Hammitt and himself, and that Crouzer would be out to get them both, now.

Getting to sleep late, he slept late, and when he got slowly and gingerly shaved and down to breakfast, Alf Bailey was long gone.

When Ethel saw his face, she said: "You saw Gil last night!"

"Yeah. He left his calling card on my face." He spilled some of his coffee into his saucer as he drained his second cup, in no mood for talk.

"Can you see out of that eye?" Ethel brought a cup of hot water and a piece of cotton to the table from the sink.

"Some."

"Bathe your eye in that a little while. It's boric acid and should help."

He obeyed, luxuriating in the soothing relief the eye-swabbing brought.

After awhile, Ethel asked: "Did Gil guess I had sent you?"

"Yeah. But why keep talking about it, now it's over?"

"That's the trouble; it's not over! It's not over because you didn't have enough tact to keep from offending Gil's colassal pride. You could have won him over very easily, by just asking him to give you a helping hand."

"That's what Gil said, too." It was illogical, but Sergeant felt on the defensive. He quit bathing his eye and arose, standing as straight as any army officer ever could.

"Oh you men of pride!" Ethel's eyes flashed and her teeth glistened in the morning light. "Why couldn't you have accepted Gil as an equal—after all, it's not his fault he's only twenty-three. Why did you have to tell him, as you most likely did, that he couldn't stand on his own two feet without destroying himself? I'll tell you something that you've been too strong-willed to admit to yourself—Gil became a gunfighter because of his admiration for you! Yes, you! He told me that even ten years ago he used to imitate you after every visit you made to his uncle

and guardian, Judge Klem. He's imitated you so well, he's nearly as fast on the draw and has killed almost as many men!"

He stared at her, open-mouthed, seeing gradually, that she had spoken with a truth and perception that had never been his own. "Does Gil realize all this himself?"

"Not entirely; most of his realization is subconscious, buried beneath his foolish, terrible, wonderful pride!"

"Then God forgive me for having been so lacking in insight."

"If he hadn't been the nephew of your best friend, you wouldn't have been so blind with him as you have been." She shook her head in vigorous reproof.

The keen probing of her words made Sergeant feel naked to his very soul. If all this was his fault, then, what could he do differently in the future from what he had done in the past? He spoke with compassion: "There's nothing I haven't done or wouldn't do for Gil. Judge Klem knows that. You know it. God, Himself, must know it. We've been kind of half-brothers, you might say, off and on for the past decade. His mother died in childbirth; his father was killed in the Civil War. Old Judge Klem, as good a man as ever stood on this earth, has tried to be a mother and father to him. Sure, I taught Gil how to draw quick and shoot straight—but in these times, in this wild country, is that a handicap? He was wild, lone-wolf type of boy ever since I first saw him. I tried hard to make an adult out of him—but I guess I've failed."

"Maybe you tried too hard, Marshal?" Her voice was calmer now, and she smiled a little Mona Lisa smile. "Maybe if you try still less, you can help me save him yet. I think he's worth the effort."

"Crouzer will try to get Gil hung as a killer; and failing that, Crouzer will try something else. He's vengeful."

"You'll remember Gil killed to save you, I hope?"

He didn't think an answer necessary.

"You're so sure of yourself, it never occurs to you that you can make mistakes." Her smile turned upside down again. "Not even an honest, God-fearing U. S. Marshal of determined good intentions, can be right all the time. That's why you can make me as mad as you make Gil."

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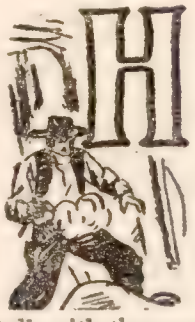

HE MARCHED from the kitchen and through the morning sunshine to the sheriff's office, trying not to let her words take complete control of his mind. He found Alf Bailey about to go across the street to the bank, for a talk with the manager.

After the greeting, Sergeant said: "I saw you talking with Mon Crouzer in here last night."

"Yeah?" Bailey scowled at Sergeant's bruised countenance. "Guess I'd a told yuh if it'd been any of y'business."

"I thought we were partners, Alf?"

"Ah figured y'might make th' same kind of mistake with Crouzer that y'seem t'have made with Hammitt." The old man's face looked very thin and parchment-gray in the shallow sunlight. "So ah thought a heart-to-heart chat with Crouzer might make him willin' t'be satisfied with a little less town-tension and a little more peace—but ah make mistakes, too. Crouzer wants everythin' all his own way."

"You were going to appease him!"

"Sure." Bailey spoke resignedly. "What does war settle?"

"The aggressor's hash, sometimes."

"Ah don't know. Take th' Civil War; ah bet they'll be fightin' that one—one way or another—for a hundred or more years t'come."

"You're a pacifist, like most old

codgers. That's why you let Ethel see Gil. You hoped Gil could work influence or put pressure on Crouzer."

"You're way off the trail, son." Bailey wagged his head sadly. "Ah reckon y'don't understan' women in general, an' Ethel in particular. She's strong-minded; she's got a streak of mule in her. If'n ah told her *not* to see Gil—why that might be th' first thing she'd do! Ah tried t'treat her with the same careful handlin' ah'd give a mule."

Bailey sounded logical. Sergeant said: "What did Crouzer tell you?"

"He told meh, in effect, t'go t'hell." Suddenly the old man's weird cackle sounded for the first time in days. "An', in effect, ah reckon ah told Crouzer he could go theah, too."

AS SHERIFF, Alf Bailey made no more than a summary investigation of the shooting in the *Red Garter*. And the townspeople, apparently believing that Crazy-legs Gaston had gotten exactly what he had been asking for, for years, did not press the sheriff into further action.

But when it got around, somehow, as rumors always do, that the local bank was sending a money shipment north before the week was out, the townsmen formed a committee of protest so quickly it almost took the old sheriff's breath away.

That same day the chairman of the committee came into the office while Sergeant was out back putting a new lock on the cell door.

When Sergeant returned and saw the short, fat man seated beside the rolltop desk, Alf Bailey said: "This is Fess Carter, Marshal. He says he an' his friends don't like t'see any shipment goin' out of this town in money-bags—and particularly not on Crouzer's stage. Says if th' stage is robbed, our bank loses standin' in Railroad City—an' we lose a bank."

After much discussion, and after the fat man had gone, Alf Bailey filled the office with a haze of pipe smoke, as he usually did when particularly agitated.

Observing the truce of words, Sergeant made himself a smoke and added to the haze in the room. At last, Bailey said: "Maybe ah did a crazy thing, but ah saw the bank manager this mornin' an' talked him into lettin' meh keep the real money shipment heah in th' office while he's loadin' a dummy shipment on Crouzer's Concord. Suppose Crouzer finds out he's been doublecrossed, sort of?"

"And he may, Alf." Sergeant wondered what had ever possessed him to believe that the old sheriff wasn't still a man of spirit. "He's got spies all over the place. You know what some—even otherwise honest people—will do for a quick buck."

"Yeah—they'll turn squealers. Suppose Fess Carter does that? Good gosh, ah tol' Fess th' money wasn't really goin' out on Crouzer's Concord, Thursday!"

"This is Tuesday," Sergeant said. "Maybe we better change plans again and put the real money bags out for that shipment north. Got to try and confuse Crouzer somehow—and I'll go along with the money, just in case."

"Mon Crouzer will most likely get wind of it no matter what we do. Let's face it!" Alf Bailey opened a window and the door and let the haze run out of the room, as the blood ran into his face. "Maybe he'll make a grab for th' money, an' mebbe he won't. But ah'm takin' no chances. Ah'm sheriff of this heah town an' th' law's gonna come out on top if ah have t'be buried with m'boots on. Ah'm goin' t'ride shotgun guard on that Thursday stage to Railroad City!"

Sergeant knew it would do no good to try and dissuade the old firehorse.

WEDNESDAY morning, by threatening to withdraw his considerable account from the local bank, Mon Crouzer pressured the manager into blurting that a big money shipment

would go north on the next morning's stage. He also told Crouzer that Sheriff Bailey—and possibly Marshal Sergeant—would be going along as armed protection. Back in his office, Crouzer pondered this latter point. He was not an impetuous man; caution warned him that both Bailey and Sergeant were not tenderfeet, that they would be on the alert and ready to defend the shipment with their lives. Crouzer, a self-admitted genius when it came to outwitting lesser brains—and he considered all other brains inferior to his own—sat and smoked until he came up with what he believed was a plan for getting his hands on the money shipment without bloodshed, and without casting any suspicion whatever upon himself.

He congratulated himself at the foresight that had made him fire Gil Hammitt without paying him, and at having kept him out of the band of riders now taking his latest herd along the trail to Railroad City. He knew Hammitt's pride would force Gil to make a demand for back wages. Smiling at the thought, Crouzer went out into his saloon.

Later that day—hot, irritated and frustrated, living in a sort of hopeless vacuum since his fight with Sergeant and his slaying of Crazy-legs Gaston—Gil Hammitt entered the *Red Garter*. He was marching past the bar toward the back office, when the bartender handed him $75 and said: "This is your back wages and a little bonus: and if you want to get anything off your chest, Mon Crouzer's in his office with the door unlocked."

Refusing the offered drink, Hammitt walked toward the office, slowly counting the gold pieces in his hands, hardly noticing that the bartender followed a few paces behind. He opened the door and saw Crouzer leaning back in his desk chair, smoking the usual cigar. Bull Dawson sat on one edge of the desk, his heavy face contorted with its usual blank frown. Hammitt shoved the $75 into a pocket as the bartender entered behind him and slammed the door.

"Things haven't been going so good, have they, son?" Crouzer waved the cigar in a sort of greeting.

"Who wants to know?"

"A would-be friend of yours. Me! When you're down on your luck, you soon learn who the fair-weather friends are." Lazily, Crouzer reached inside his frock coat and produced a cigar. "Have a good smoke, Gil."

THINKING about that matter of fair-weather friends, and feeling sorry for himself, Hammitt reached forth for that cigar—and had first one wrist, then the other grabbed in Dawson's ham-like paws, while simultaneously, the bartender pressed a gun against his spine. He heard the bartender cock the sixshooter as Crouzer said: "Now, Bull. Now!"

Dropping one wrist, Dawson lifted the Colt from Hammitt's holster, then dropped the other wrist. After his first shock of surprise, Hammitt stood waiting, watching the smirk on Crouzer's conceited face.

"No harm meant," Crouzer said. "Just wanted to de-fang you before telling you something."

Hammitt said coldly: "About the offered cigar; you can keep it."

"Suit yourself." As Crouzer spoke, the bartender backed up against the door, sheathing his gun as he did so, but keeping a hand on it."

Meanwhile, Bull Dawson re-seated himself on the desk and began fiddling foolishly with Hammitt's Colt, as if not sure what to do with it. Hammitt noted also, that Crouzer, returning the cigar to his inside pocket, had a gun in a shoulder holster.

"You're not safe with a gun, Gil," Crouzer finally said. "I fully realized that when you killed Crazy-legs."

"You know why I killed him."

"Because of your fellow lawdog, Sergeant—and that's what I want to talk

to you about. I happen to know $15,000 in cash is going out on my Concord tomorrow, that Bailey and Sergeant are going out too, as guards. I also know that you weren't asked to help them, because Sergeant told Bailey you weren't to be trusted—and that if you showed up, your badge would be taken from you and you'd be pushed into jail for safekeeping while the shipment was en route north."

"And you want me to rob the stage and get revenge on my erstwhile friend at the same time, eh?" Gil's words were edged with sarcasm. "Do you want me to kill Sergeant and Bailey just outside Stagestop, or shall I wait until the coach gets further out into the flats?"

"You're pretty smart, perhaps too smart." Crouzer arose and pointed to pen, ink and paper on his desk. "But that's not what I want you to do at all. I want you to write an epistle to Sergeant, telling him you will die before dawn, if he doesn't come here to see me."

"But you just said he doesn't give a damn for me."

"Never mind what I said." Crouzer pushed Hammitt into the chair. "Write the note! You might as well, for I'll get the money anyway. And if my men have to pull a holdup, that means Sergeant and the old sheriff will be killed—along with everybody else on or in the coach. You certainly don't want your girl's grandfather killed—and I suspect Sergeant doesn't want your death on his conscience."

"Sometimes the pen *isn't* mightier than the sword, as the feller said, Crouzer." Hammitt fished the $75 from his pocket and laid it tidily out atop the desk. "From now on I'm on my own. I'm not messing around with anybody—including Sergeant and you. Go ahead and handle the holdup any way you like, if you're so sure you can handle the Marshal—which I doubt."

"I had hoped to avoid violence," Crouzer said piously; "but if you won't cooperate, what else is there to do?"

"You're a bright fellow. You tell me."

"All right." Crouzer disclosed his plan, as if hoping its business-like construction would make Hammitt have a change of heart. He told how he would have a band of riflemen on either side of the trail in Abrasive Pass. The Concord, moving slowly because of the perpetual wind and the rough going, would be picked off like a sitting duck and its little brood. "I'll get the money easily; it's only that I dislike killing people."

"What you probably dislike," Hammitt toyed with the bottle of ink, "is the possibility of attracting publicity to yourself."

"You're the type who can sorely try a man's soul," Crouzer said.

"Am I?" Hammitt watched the shadow of exasperation cross Crouzer's hard face as the man bent down to snatch the ink bottle away—or, perhaps, to retrieve the $75 on the desk. Noting that Crouzer's bulk was between himself and the nervous bartender, Hammitt grabbed the lapels of the open frock coat and pulling Crouzer down, smacked him between the eyes with the un-capped ink bottle, frisking the sixshooter from inside the coat as Bull Dawson looked up from his play with the Colt. It was then the bartender's sixshooter roared and Hammitt lost consciousness. When he woke up, he had the feeling somebody with a chisel and a hammer had successfully gouged a lot of flesh and perhaps some bone from the crown of his head.

"Perhaps you'll write that note, now," Crouzer was saying.

SERGEANT read and re-read that note, which said: *Bob, I'm writing this under the muzzle of a gun, and Crouzer says if you don't visit him pronto—the gun will go off. Personally, I hope it does. ... Yrs. ... Gil.*

Sergeant knew it was Gil's own handwriting, all right. He knew also, not

being stupid, that it was the bait of a trap. Still, there was nothing to do now, but do as the note suggested, and hope for the best.

He went up to his room, oiled his guns thoroughly, checked his .45 slugs, that, in the black gunbelt around his hard hips, looked like brass commandments, in a way. When he got downstairs again, he tried to sneak past Ethel Bailey who was busy shoving wood into her cook stove. But he did not succeed.

"Wait a minute," she pushed back a few damp strands of hair from her face, "and you can have a drink of lemonade with me."

"After I see Crouzer," he said; "no time to lose."

"You, see Crouzer? I can't believe it!"

"No? Read that." He produced Gil's note and handed it over.

"Crouzer! Oh, that awful man! This must be true, because Gil would never —absolutely never—on his own accord, ask you for anything."

"Sure it's true." He turned to leave. "Crouzer's stacked the desk; now I'll have to see what he can do with his best cards."

"Wait." She grabbed his arm. "Why did Gil consent to that note? Not because he was scared; he just doesn't scare! But obviously, he wanted you to come. Why?" She scratched her pert nose. "Why, maybe he reasoned you'd show me the note just to show me you were always right about him."

"Nonsense," Sergeant said.

"Is it? You've always judged Gil without really understanding him. You've treated him as a willful, spoiled little brat."

"You mean he isn't?" Sergeant spoke harshly. "You mean he can get out of this mess by himself?"

"I mean he wants you to come. I mean he knows you'll come prepared—and I mean he knows what he's doing, because I know he's a man!"

"I hope you're right; I hope Gil has figured that this thing is the best for all concerned." He felt mean telling her this, felt it was only encouraging her own off-trail logic, which was nothing more than a woman's faith in the man she loved. He touched his hat, turned and left the building.

WHEN HE reached the *Red Garter*, the bartender was waiting outside the office door, beckoning. When he went into the room, after the bartender had pushed open the door with a foot, he had his .45s lifted from his belt by the tall man in the short, dirty apron.

"We want you to visit with us," the bartender waved the two pearl-handled sixshooters, "but minus these."

In the office, as the door closed behind him, Sergeant noticed that big Bull Dawson was standing with his back against another door behind the desk at which Crouzer sat.

"Hello, Marshal." Crouzer did not stand up but just beckoned to Dawson, who opened the door behind him.

The door revealed a closet, and Gil Hammitt, whom Dawson picked up bodily and tossed onto the office floor. Gil had a gunshot wound atop of his head that hadn't been attended to, and his face was just one big, awful purple bruise. But he managed to whisper: "Howdy, Bob. I thought you could use your fists, but you can't touch Dawson's efficiency."

Sergeant turned to Dawson. "Why don't you beat up somebody your own size?"

"You want me to ask Bull to work you over, too?" It was Crouzer who spoke.

"What do you want?" Sergeant turned to Crouzer.

"The $15,000 scheduled to leave town tomorrow."

Sergeant measured the man. "Suppose the money doesn't leave town tomorrow? Suppose it stays right in the bank?"

"Then Hammitt gets worked over again by Dawson's fists, until there's nothing left—including his brains.

Moreover, it wouldn't look so good for you, would it, if a deputy's badge was found in Hammitt's pocket? Deputies are supposed to wear their badges in plain sight."

"Tell him to go to hell," Gil muttered; "you know it would ruin Ethel's Grandpop if that money was lost."

"Go to hell," Sergeant told Crouzer. "That's what the boy says—and I like the sound of it, too. As for you, Dawson, keep your paws off the boy—or you'll live to regret it."

"But will I?" Crouzer produced another cigar and bit off the end. "I could kill the boy—much to Miss Ethel Bailey's distress, I'm sure."

Sergeant's face muscles tightened, then relaxed. "All right, you'll get the $15,000, if you come after it, but Sheriff Bailey will be expecting me to ride as a guard of the shipment with him."

"Sure. We'll pick the Concord up at Abrasive Pass. Nobody will be hurt—because you're now in this as deep as Hammitt. If anything goes haywire—you and he become the goats. After it's all over, you can take the kid away and never return. You see, I have it all figured out."

"Looks that way," Sergeant agreed.

- 6 -

LONG AFTER his deal with Crouzer, with the sun as low as his morale, and his guns feeling useless at his hips, he went into the sheriff's office and asked: "Isn't it about supper-time, Alf?"

"Yeah, yuh go ahead. Ah'll be lockin' up."

But before he went, and while Bailey was preoccupied, he wrote a note, jammed it into his pocket, then walked around the building to the kitchen.

"Did you," Ethel asked at once, "see Crouzer?"

"Yeh. Gil's still among the quick—but you've got to help."

"How?"

"By keeping quiet about this in your Grandfather's presence, for one thing."

"And for another?"

He told her, giving her the note as he did so. She read it and thrust it into the bosom of her dress, asking no more questions, but saying: "This must be very important—because you never asked anyone for help before."

He nodded, just as old Alf ambled in. After supper he played checkers with Alf until Ethel appeared, dressed to go out.

"I'm going to choir rehearsal," she said. "Go to bed early, Grandpop."

"All right, but ah didn't know th' choir rehearsed Thursday nights." And resuming his checker game, he acted as if he didn't much care.

After the old man's usual success with the games, and after he had gone upstairs to bed, Sergeant went out on the back porch and smoked two cigarets—an unusual procedure for him—making no effort to hide from the spying eyes that he assumed Crouzer would have watching him. Crouzer, Sergeant knew, being without principle himself, would never trust anyone else—particularly at a crucial time like this.

Eventually he went into the kitchen and stood in the open door until Ethel returned. "Did you have a successful choir rehearsal?" He asked her that.

"Yes." She looked around, then lowered her voice; "very successful."

He nodded, and watched her run directly off upstairs, thinking of the problem and the conflicts ahead that made it necessary for him to decide for sure whether he should sacrifice the life of her old Grandfather for her young lover. When the hour grew late, and the town of Stagestop very dark, he opened the kitchen door, stuck his head out to look and listen, then

stepped out and closed the door softly behind him.

In the shadows, out of the moonlight, he removed his silver spurs, pocketed them, and held his hands over the glittering handles of his guns. Finally, hearing nor seeing nothing, he made a dash for the barn and remained there in the blackness and the quiet that was disturbed only when the hipshot buckskin in its stall, shifted in its sleep.

He did not hear the short, fat man arrive, for he came in his socks with his boots in one pudgy hand, peered into the darkness, and said: "Is that you, Marshal?"

"Yeh. Come in, Carter."

Fess Carter obeyed. "Miss Bailey gave me your message; what's up?"

Sergeant explained—telling him everything, because he knew the man, as chairman of the committee that was worried about the money in the local bank, could throw around much weight and prestige in this town. When he had finished, he added: "So that's the way I see it. Do you agree with me?"

"I want one point cleared up, first." The timbre of Carter's voice made it certain once and for all, that he was no hireling of Crouzer's. "Are you and the sheriff taking full responsibility for that $15,000? That's a lot of money in the finances of this little town."

"Absolutely, full responsibility."

"Then I'm with you."

EVEN BEFORE the sun got really started west, Sergeant knew that Thursday was going to be a hot day, in more respects than one. From the back of his buckskin, he helped Alf Bailey climb up into the high seat at the left of the stage driver. The $15,000 was in the boot and Alf had a carbine cradled in his arms.

"You must be expecting a holdup, Sheriff," Crouzer's driver said.

"Whata y'expectin'?" old Alf snapped, taking the sixshooter from the young driver's holster.

Sergeant smiled inwardly, and watched the last of the passengers enter the coach. Their baggage was already lashed on behind. The passengers were four Stagestop men—from the committee that Fess Carter chairmanned. Carter, himself, with others of his committee, and with Ethel Bailey, stood on the boardwalk; Sergeant heard the driver's whip crack and saw six horses jump forward, their sleek muscles bunching, their legs working hard, as the heavy stage started a-rolling and a-rocking on.

In the thunder of hooves and the clatter of ponderous wagon-wheels, Sergeant thought: *I wonder if Mon Crouzer ever got up this early before.*

Turning in the saddle, Sergeant could still see Crouzer standing between the *Red Garter's* swinging-doors, and Crouzer still had a smirk on his heavy face—the way a vain man smirks when he knows he has successfully pitted both ends against the middle.

The trail ran over the brilliant desert flats, straight as an arrow toward the mountains, while on three sides space seemed as limitless as the blue bowl of the cloudless sky. From around a distant creosote bush, Sergeant saw a swift road-runner, topknot bobbing, tail rampant, in hot pursuit of a juicy lizard. The clean, transparent air overhung everything like a skylight of the purest glass. The winds that, untrammeled by thick stands of trees, usually blew unbridled—were now still.

But as the trail began to lift and the blue sky turn to flame, the windless day, now super-heated, made the approaches of Abrasive Pass seem as unreal as a mirage. And the nearer they got to the mouth of the pass, the stronger the wind became. Sergeant noticed that the high spirits of the three pairs of coach horses no longer had to be held in check by the driver. Many times, as those horses were rested, Sergeant fell back to study the trail behind.

"Yuh ain't rested them hosses long enough," Alf Bailey once accused the

driver. "What's the blame hurry?"

The driver didn't say—but Sergeant was glad he did hurry, and that he never once looked back.

The stage pulled up in the yard of Quentin Ross at approximately noon, and Sergeant pondered the tricks of fate that forced a man like Ross to give the use of his place as a stage-stop for a little extra hard money—even if it had to come from Mon Crouzer! Ross' shoulder was still bandaged, but he could use it some.

"Dinner's ready," Mrs. Ross called from the house.

THE FOUR male passengers climbed stiffly down; Ross, and his only hired hand, attended to the horses. Alf Bailey laid his carbine on the seat and arose to stretch, his ancient joints popping and creaking like weathered boards.

"Don't worry about the $15,000," Sergeant said. "I'll watch it. You come down and go eat."

After Bailey had obeyed, the young stage-driver approached Sergeant and quietly said: "Ready?"

"Ready." But now that the moment had come, Sergeant felt tense. Ross and his hired hand were leading the horses toward the barn. The laconic driver was looking at him quizzically. He recalled Crouzer's description of his man.

"Come on, before Bailey gets out here!"

"You're Crouzer's son?"

"That's right."

"You're to wait here with the money until the other man comes with the wagon?"

"That's right."

"All right." Sergeant helped Crouzer's misbegotten son remove the $15,000 from the stage boot, and carry it, in an express box, to the nearby harness shed, where it was hidden under a pile of junk, after which Crouzer's son said: "The old man said, any tricks, and you'll find Hammitt's body in Bailey's barn."

Sergeant wondered why Crouzer had acknowledged this son; it only went to show how unpredictable Crouzer could be. "You're to pretend you're sick, so's you can be with the money until the wagon comes from Stagestop?"

"Right."

"Get sick then. I'll have Ross replace you as driver."

"That part's wrong—you are to replace me."

"Get sick, damn you!"

The man sat down in the shade with his back against the shed. When Ross and his hired hand returned with the fed and watered team, the driver kept sitting. Sergeant explained the man was sick, and helped the other two hitch the team. When Bailey appeared, wiping his mouth on his shirt sleeve, Sergeant went in to eat, after first telling the sheriff about the sick driver.

Sergeant ate slowly, talking to the four passengers between bites, and in low tones, going over with them what they were to do. They were to go up Abrasive Pass a few miles; then after explaining everything to Bailey, they were to turn around and come back, collect the $15,000 from the harness shed, tie up Crouzer's son and heave him aboard also—then head back for Stagestop. But two of the passengers were to stay here—to handle the driver who was supposed to be sick, and who wasn't armed.

When Sergeant came out of the house with the two passengers, who got into the coach, Bailey asked: "What about the other two?"

"They've decided to return to Stagestop," Sergeant said; "they'll wait here for the stage to return. Matter of fact, this is where I turn back, too."

Bailey, his rifle across his knees, looked down. "What's that?"

"Alf, just do as I say. You'll understand everything, soon enough." Sergeant then started talking Ross into serving as driver—and if anything, Ross was more surprised than Bailey.

But at last the job was done and the Concord was once again headed north.

WHEN IT was gone, the two men in the house came out and promptly took care of the by-now, completely frightened young stage driver. Sergeant told them: "The idea of sending the stage on, is to decoy the man Crouzer sent in the wagon, to come on in. He will have been near enough to have seen the dust of the stage's leaving. When he gets here—you two should be able to handle him."

Both men had rifles, now, that they had taken from Ross' kitchen. They both nodded and sat down in the shed with Crouzer's son between them.

When Ross' hired hand, who had gone to the barn, returned, Sergeant walked into the house and talked with him and Mrs. Ross for a short time, then came out and got aboard his own fed and watered horse, thinking as he did so: *Now, if Crouzer hasn't instructed any of that gang taking the herd to Railroad City, to come back for an ambush in Abrasive Pass—everything will be fine. I'm banking on the proposition that Crouzer will want his herd to reach the market, while the price is still high.*

He waved to Fess Carter's two committeemen, then keeping close to the rocks and brush on the outside of Abrasive Pass—so that he could not be seen by the wagon-driver coming in from the desert—he urged his buckskin into a heavy trot. The shadows were commencing to lengthen eastward now. He kept snug against the walls of the pass until he saw the dust of the wagon trail into Quentin Ross' yard, then he cut directly across the open desert toward Stagestop until he hit the old trail south, at which he let his mount move along at an easy lope. When he finally reached the northern outskirts of town, he pulled the horse up to a slow walk, then stopped to roll himself a cigaret and breathe the buckskin.

It would not pay to be in too much of a hurry now, for at this point, all planned procedure was more or less un-planned. Everything from here on, was more or less of a gamble, depending upon what the unpredictable Mon Crouzer would do. He accepted this fact without inner or outer emotion. He had risked his own life too many times in the past, to get excited about doing so again—although the other lives at stake, were a responsibility that touched him deeply. It made him think things over as he smoked, and as his horse nibbled at some bunch grass near a creek that was practically dried out now. He could not count on help from Gil Hammitt this time, for since the terrible beating Gil had taken from Bull Dawson, his reckless courage seemed absent. Sergeant had noticed that yesterday; he had noticed how dull Gil's eyes had become—and he had seen the fear there. He heaved his cigaret into the sand, finally, and kicked his horse on.

- 7 -

MAIN STREET lay like a shed snakeskin in the late afternoon heat. He stopped before the *Red Garter*, fastened his horse and slapped in the batwing doors, standing for a second, while his eyes focussed in the comparative dimness. Crouzer and Dawson, at the bar, had swung around at the sound of the rusty-hinged doors.

Crouzer registered surprise. "You're supposed to be driving my Concord north!"

"Maybe I decided I couldn't handle a six-horse hitch."

"I doubt that."

"Do you?"

"You heard me."

"Relax, your son and the $15,000 will be back here in the wagon, soon enough."

Crouzer's expression resembled that

of a mind-reader who suddenly discovers he can't read minds any more. Finally he jerked his head toward his office, his right hand slipping under his coat. "Let's go out back; you first."

Sergeant obeyed. The office door was open. Crouzer and Dawson followed him in.

The barkeeper, armed, sitting with the top of his chair hooked under the doorknob of the closet door beyond Crouzer's desk, looked up guiltily, as if he had been dozing slightly. From the side of his mouth, Crouzer ordered the bartender away from there, and told Dawson to take Gil Hammitt out.

When, for the second time in Sergeant's presence, Hammitt was heaved to the office floor like a sack of grain, Gil complained: "Why did you return?"

"To see Crouzer let you go."

"He got the $15,000?"

"Not yet. You sorry?"

Hammitt did not say.

It grew dark and the lamps were turned on. Finally there was the rattling sound of a wagon in the dark alley beyond the rear door of the office, and Crouzer told the bartender, who apparently had been taking too many free drinks on the house: "Go see if that's them!"

There was the thump, as of a heavy box being thrown from the wagon to the ground, followed eventually, by the bartender dragging the box into the office, as a dog drags a too-big bone.

Crouzer immediately got so excited he forgot to think about—let alone ask questions about—his son and the man who had driven the wagon originally. He started to open the box, then his old congenital cunning seemed to get the better of him. He went to his desk chair, sat down, lighted a cigar, slowly said: "I didn't think you'd pay such a high price for Hammitt's life—but you've done so."

At once, Hammitt said: "I didn't think you'd be such a fool either, Bob."

And Sergeant found himself thinking: *I see it now. Crouzer, expecting a doublecross at Ross' place, had arranged for his gunmen to intercept the stage and kill all aboard. Gil knew that, and played this little game hoping it would save my life and old Bailey's. Well, Crouzer was doublecrossed at Ross' place all right—but not the way he figured.*

FINALLY, Crouzer told Dawson to put the express box of money on the desk. Crouzer still seemed too greedy-eyed about the money to think about the matter of his absent wagon driver and misbegotten son. It was at this time that Hammitt looked directly at Sergeant, and Sergeant winked almost imperceptibly.

Crouzer sat there smoking and sort of gloating over the box, as if the mere thought of $15,000 made him incapable of thinking of anything else with any studied concentration. It was then that Sergeant looked directly at Hammitt, and Gil imperceptibly winked back at him.

Crouzer fiddled with the padlocked box awhile, then asked Sergeant: "Where's the key?"

"Here." Sergeant produced and handed over the key.

The bartender seemed more bushed than ever from the exertion of dragging the heavy box into the office, and he began to hiccough sleepily. Bull Dawson stood by the open closet door, his heavy hands resting on his gunbelt, his bloodshot eyes resting on Hammitt's bruised face as if he were enjoying

the prospects of brutalizing Gil further. Two paces from Sergeant, Crouzer was turning the key in the padlock.

Sergeant edged toward the enthralled Crouzer, but Dawson noticed this, jerked his sixshooter free, and said: "Stay where you are, lawdog."

Crouzer looked up briefly, but just as he was opening the box—and the money therein seemed to hypnotize him. Crouzer let forth a glad sort of cry and lifted a packet of money out in each hand. Bull Dawson gaped, too.

Almost before Sergeant could think, let alone move, Gil Hammitt was up off the office floor and charging headfirst into the off-balance Dawson. Sergeant bent toward the man nearest him, the bartender—and grabbing him like a shield, pushed him into Crouzer's side. In nothing flat, Sergeant found himself wrestling with the bartender and Crouzer, and cursing himself for not having pulled a gun on them—forgetting that, in the heat of violent action, men often move first and think afterwards.

He heard Bull Dawson's big back hit the floor hard; then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Hammitt grab the brute by both ears and hammer the back of his bulletlike skull against the floor, again and again and again.

Sergeant felt his own fist crash into the bartender's bearded face and saw the man drop as though dead. But then Crouzer's brains began working rationally again. Crouzer went for the gun inside his coat and got it out while Sergeant's fist was still following through past the bartender's jaw. There was a thunderous roar as Sergeant went for both of his own guns. A slug, like a kicking mule, hit Sergeant in the left shoulder and the gun on that side dropped from his numb hand. The gun in his right jumped and spun Crouzer around, without dropping him.

For a moment, with the blood soaking his shirt, Sergeant reeled like a drunken man, stumbled over the fallen bartender and hit the floor with a thud that made the room go around and around. But all this time he was vaguely aware that Gil had Dawson's gun and was exchanging shots with Crouzer. All at once, Sergeant found himself sitting up like a straw man and watching Crouzer's body jerk as the heavy slugs plowed into him, *thuck, thuck, thuck*—a horrible sound. Like a top losing momentum, Crouzer fought for balance; then he spun to the floor, where, gun in one hand and bundle of bills in the other, he tried to push himself up, his face like white cardboard. Failing, his face hit the floor, hard, and he did not move again.

At this point, there was the distant clatter of firearms that kept coming nearer and nearer to Stagestop.

SERGEANT was, actually, as helpless as a scarecrow now. He could not control his legs; he could not feel; he could barely think. But he could hear Gil saying: "The fight seems to be outside now; you stay with the money."

Sergeant, sitting in the desk chair that had held Crouzer so often, watched Gil go, while the pain in his shoulder throbbed with his hectic pulse. He heard Gil calling Alf Bailey's name. He heard the voices of many men, as though it were one voice, and the firing of many shots, as if they were one shot. Then he slumped forward on the desk.

When he could see and feel and hear again, he found himself on his bed on the second floor of Alf Bailey's house. A doctor was standing in one corner of the room talking in low tones to the old sheriff. Gil Hammitt and Ethel Bailey were standing near the bed. Ethel inquired first: "How do you feel Marshal?"

"All right. How long have I been here?"

"All night."

He could tell by the feel of his shoulder that the doc had got the bullet out and the bones set. "What hap-

pened, Gil?" He found he could sit up.

"About the way you planned it with Fess Carter, Bob—except that a mob of Crouzer's riflemen tried to ambush the Concord in Abrasive Pass. Ross got the Concord swung around and headed thisaway, while a running gunfight ensued. The two Carter men guarding Crouzer's son and Crouzer's wagon-driver, hearing the on-coming battle, put the $15,000 and Crouzer's hoodlums in the wagon and preceded the Concord and the mounted riflemen, here. They knew you'd be in Crouzer's office and figured it would help you if they dumped the box of money there. They knew the money wouldn't go far away—what with every able-bodied man in town armed, led by Fess Carter, and just waiting for a chance to blow off steam or some outlaws' heads. What remains alive of Crouzer's mob is now in jail."

From across the room, Alf Bailey called: "Ah oughta be mad at yuh. That's what!"

The doctor lead the volley of general laughter. Sergeant found himself laughing a bit too—laughing at himself. He was surprised to find out that it didn't hurt his shoulder to laugh. He stood up unassisted, not realizing he was in his underwear. When Ethel fled, there was more laughter, while he helped dress himself, feeling too embarrassed to laugh again. It was then he noticed Gil Hammitt was wearing the U. S. Deputy Marshal's badge pinned to his shirt again.

"You plan to stay here and oversee this territory, Gil?"

"Yeah," Gil said.

"Fine. Your Uncle Klem will be happy to hear that." But Sergeant walked out of there and downstairs, not feeling happy himself. Gil followed him.

In the kitchen, Ethel looked at them and said: "I'm so glad you two understand each other at last."

"It'll be your job to understand Gil now." He tried to look at her.

"Yes." And woman-like, she ran up and kissed him right on the mouth.

Her lips were very soft and sweet, but Gil was the lucky man. Gil was going to marry the girl. At that he grinned inwardly. *Here I am trying to be my old noble self again.*

"We'll name the first boy, Bob," Gil said.

That did it. Sergeant turned and walked out of the house.

HE GOT THE bridle on his buckskin with one hand; then Gil Hammitt came out to the barn and threw the saddle on for him. He began to feel as if Gil were anxious to see him go lest Ethel change her female mind about which man she loved! Sergeant climbed into the saddle, not feeling weak at all now, said, "Keep out of trouble. That'll be a man-sized job for you, Gil." Then pushed the buckskin out onto Main Street and headed north, living in that state of mental solitude now, which is so painful to youth and so delicious to maturity.

"You're a great guy!" Gil called.

Sergeant's jaw tightened from habit. He wanted to tell Gil: *Don't be an ass! You've turned out to be a better man than me. I hope you'll take as good care of Ethel as I could have done.* But the sound of Gil trying to be as noble as Robert Sergeant had always been, changed Sergeant's mind. He said: "You're quite a guy yourself, Gil."

Gil Hammitt's reaction was to come running after the buckskin with long strides. The flaps of his chaps down each elongated thigh swung to his lope. His booted feet seemed only briefly to touch upon the sun-abused terrain. There were tears in his eyes! But he could not catch the buckskin.

At the far end of Main Street, Sergeant turned to see that Ethel had been running after Gil and had caught up with him and was holding him while he held her. Sergeant dug the spurs home and Stagestop slowly fell behind an arid dune.

★

WESTERN BRAIN-MIXERS

Take A Whirl At This Cow-Country Quiz

by James Hines

1. What notorious Texas outlaw, famous in song and story, was once employed by a sheriff of the Lone Star State?
2. What noted gunman would often surprise his wife by shooting a rose out of her hair, or a cup of coffee out of her hand, as she came from the kitchen?
3. In general, during what season of the year are most range calves born?
4. A cow's tongue often hangs out when she is over-heated or over-tired from too much exertion. Is this true of a horse?
5. What year was it that Wyatt Earp, the famous marshal, arrived in Tombstone, Arizona?
6. True or False? Rattlesnakes can coil and strike while afloat on water.
7. In cattle brands a short rail is called a "————————?"
   A tilted rail is called a "————————?"
8. Can you identify this state by these rivers and creeks within its borders: Humboldt, Little High Rock, Thousand, Salmon, Sun, Owhyee, Colorado?
9. Who was Arizona's most famous outlaw?
10. Who was Dutch Annie?
11. How did the "Cherokee Strip," or "Cherokee Outlet," get its name?
12. True or False? Milk in the days of the Old West was almost unknown, as no self-respecting cowboy would stoop so low as to milk a cow.
13. Name five famous gunfighters who lived in Dodge City, Kansas, at one time or another, when it was a tough, rough and roaring cattle town.
14. Sometimes when crossing a trail herd across a stream the leaders of the herd of cattle would become alarmed at the swiftness of the current, and they would be apt to "mill" in a mad circle. What would the cowboys do to stop or prevent this?
15. How many sections of land is the famous 101 Ranch of Texas said to have once contained?
16. Buffalo meat is not like beef. Can you describe it?
17. Are most saddles made with the leather flesh-side out or hair-side out?
18. Most Southwesterners know what to do with *tacos, enchiladas, tortillas, sopaphillas, frijoles fritos,* and *tamales.* Do you?
19. Where, and when, and how old was Bat Masterson, the famous gunfighter, at the time he killed his first man?

(Answers on page 129.)

★

Once again the Deputy Marshal meets up with a weird character out of books and legend — Sisyphus, the man the gods condemned forever to roll a stone up a mountainside. And somehow, Winters was supposed to rescue him, after all these centuries...

THE ROLLING STONE

Lee Winters story

by LON WILLIAMS

DEPUTY MARSHAL Lee Winters, chilled and unnerved by a recent shootout with one soapweed Claver, rode slowly homeward to Forlorn Gap along a narrow mountain trail northeast of Cow Creek's turbulent gold-mining community. It was a calm, cloudless afternoon—too calm, he thought, for that time and place. In his disturbed mental state, always present after a deadly encounter, he half-expected something unusual and terrifying to happen.

In due time he reached a spot where his trail widened into a region of grass, pleasantly smelling air and twitter of songbirds. There, quietly grazing, was a fawn, sleek and, he reflected, extraordinarily tempting to a man whose hunger for venison had long gone unsatisfied.

Experience, coupled with his natural fear of unusual things and events, warned him that some sort of witchery was afoot, that no young deer would graze alone like that, nor in such seeming unawareness of peril. But his apprehensions yielded to carnivorous instinct, rather than to reason.

He pulled his horse Cannon Ball to a quick stop. Before he could ready his sixgun, however, this surprising wild thing lifted its head, took fright and leaped swiftly away. Confident that Cannon Ball could overtake it, Lee urged him forward. Followed a long chase, alternately disappointing and hopeful, but never quite successful. It played out completely and Winters gave up in a lonely ravine where flowed a clear, enchanting stream.

He was thirsty, and he assumed that Cannon Ball, also, would like a drink. Watering places in this jumbled wilderness were few and far between. Winters swung off, flattened himself face down on a bar of gravel and sand and imbibed freely. But his horse stood with head up and viewed his master's performance with equine wonder.

Winters got up. "What's wrong, horse?"

For reply, Cannon Ball shook his head; bridle bit and rings tinkled with eerie sharpness and tiny echoes rippled musically.

Suddenly Lee slapped a hand to his forehead. Queer dizziness had seized

Winters felt he ought to know this shadowy figure . . .

him. To avoid falling, he left his horse and sat down, his back supported by a boulder. Perhaps in that gunfight a bullet had grazed his head without his being conscious of it. Examination, however, revealed no trace of injury; he stared, puzzled, at his surroundings.

This was a wilderness place, locked by steep mountains, guarded by towers of craggy stone, with only scattered pines to give it semblance of life in any form. Its solitude and loneliness were frightening—especially now that he had this strange, depressed feeling.

Scared at thoughts of becoming lost in such surroundings, he got up to mount Cannon Ball for a fast ride. Then it happened. A rumbling, bumping noise commenced. At Winters' back was a high, steeply rising mountainside, its surface free of trees—and with few cliffs or ledges to mar its face.

Lee flung a quick upward glance. In that instant he saw a stone rolling and leaping downward. It looked to be as large as a barrel, though more spherical than cylindrical. Something, too, was wrapped around it, like a bulky, misshapen hoop.

IT CAME with hurtling fury, passed within a few feet of Winters, splashed, ran up a steep bank opposite Winters, then rolled back and stopped almost at his feet. To his amazement, its hoop disengaged itself and assumed human shape. Somewhat flattened in appearance, it coughed, heaved its chest, and by a process of puffing and

filling became a long-haired, bushy-bearded man.

He was no ordinary desert rat either, but had stature, large bones and powerful muscles. His clothing consisted of a heavy, dirty loin cloth and sandals so worn and ragged that they barely clung to his feet.

He glanced at Lee, his eyes accusing and malevolent. "So you've come at last, Winters."

Winters gasped in surprise. "What do you mean, I've come at last?"

There was a snarling, hostile response. "You're overdue by many hundred of years. Here I've been rolling this stone and splashing through Banshee Creek, it looked like forever, when you ought've been here long ago. What's been keeping you, laggard?"

So this is Banshee Creek, thought Lee. *No wonder I'm seeing things.* But even a ghost could be insulting. "You're loco," he declared angrily. "Who are you anyhow?"

"Don't tell me you've never heard of Sisyphus."

"Sisyphus! Of course not. Besides, how come you rolled down that mountainside with yourself wrapped around a stone? Couldn't you think up an easier way to come down?"

"Winters," retorted Sisyphus, "if you've come here only to taunt me with your insults—" His voice sank away in sickly fear, as a bird with vast wings and long talons swept down from a mountain crag. Sisyphus crouched behind his waiting stone and began to roll it upward. Muscles in his arms, legs and back swelled and writhed as he bent to his labor; he groaned and g r u n t e d. Once he glared back at Winters and called threateningly, "I'll settle accounts with you for leaving me in this misery so long. You're a mean man, Winters."

Winters had small relish for arguments, and he had none at all for anybody so unreasonable as Sisyphus. Between trying to steady his brain and keep an eye on Sisyphus, he tried to think. Where had he seen, or heard of, this strange character before?

Gradually his mind functioned and he remembered. Myra, his eager-brained young wife, had read to him about such a character. He remembered now. With a finger she had pointed out a name in a book of myths. He had pronounced it Si-siffus, though he recalled that it was spelled Sisyphus. He recalled, also, that Sisyphus had been a thief—such a thorough and greedy one, that a goddess named Juno had designed for him this wearisome punishment. Poor Sisyphus was doomed to roll his unconquerable stone uphill forever.

Lee watched until man and stone were so far up he could hardly see them. Then something went wrong; Sisyphus and his stone came rolling, bounding down, as before.

When Sisyphus had got shape into his flattened body again, he glared furiously at Winters. "Why don't you help me? Don't just stand there. You're supposed to be a mighty hero and fearless warrior, chosen by beautiful Diana to release me from my terrible fate. But all you do is stand there with your mouth open and stare at me like a halfwit. You don't look like much of a hero—"

Again his words sickened; a swift shadow of wings warned of danger. He snapped to his labor once more, and again his muscles swelled as he rolled and heaved the huge stone.

WINTERS decided that if he ever got any words of consequence with Sisyphus, he'd have to do some mountain-climbing. He left Cannon Ball ground-hitched and humped along upward beside Sisyphus.

"Look here, Si," he said, ready to give advice, "why don't you quit this nonsense and take a rest?"

Sisyphus turned his head and faced Winters with bitter scorn. "Your ignorance is pitiful, Winters," he replied between grunts. "When Diana chose a

hero to rescue me, she picked a mighty sorry one. I even suspect you of being some shabby imposter sent by Juno herself to taunt and insult me. It would be about like Juno to do just that; she's crafty that way, Winters. She's not my idea of a good woman, and never was. This rock torture—it's called Torturus, you maybe know—could've been thought up by nobody except some female goddess with a heart of stone. But you, Winters, why are you so stupid?"

"I was wondering that way about you, Si," Winters replied dryly. "You look tired, yet you don't stop to rest. You work as if you was in a hurry, yet you don't get nothing finished. Where are you trying to roll that rock to?"

Sisyphus regarded Winters with hostile scorn. "Even mortal man is supposed to know a little something. Don't you know this is Mount Horizon? Don't you know that if I can ever reach its top and give this rock a heave down its other side, I'll be free of it? Once I almost made it, too; I would have, but its summit moved. It cheated.

"As to why I don't quit, you ought to know that. Take a look at my belly. Take a look at that filthy vulture called Talon. I can't stop to rest, Winters; if I did, that vulture would rend me to shreds. There are times when I get so tired I can't go on. Then what happens? Talon swoops down, tears me open and eats my insides out. You'd think I'd die, and I've wished endless times I could. But overnight my insides grow back again, and at dawn I— Oh-oh!" His feet almost slipped.

"You've got it all mixed up," declared Winters. "My wife's got a book that tells about you fellers. It was Prometheus who got his insides et out by a vulture; it wasn't you, Si. And this Prometheus was chained to a rock on a high mountain. You're claiming credit for something that don't belong to you."

"Your wife's book is all wrong, Winters," Sisyphus declared angrily. "Books are full of lies. Any books that says it wasn't Sisyphus who got his insides— Oh-oh! Here it goes."

His strength had failed. He flung his arms around Torturus in a desperate effort to prevent its rolling back. But it was no use; down went Torturus, Sisyphus wrapped round it like a hoop, or like a tire on a wagon wheel. Overhead, Talon circled ominously.

Getting hungry, thought Lee.

He slid and jolted down Mount Horizon, determined to ride away from this miserable spectacle. He was almost down when he met Sisyphus laboring upward again.

Lee turned back and asked, "Why don't you wring that bird's neck, Si?"

"Get out of my sight, you brainless one!" stormed Sisyphus. "Talon was sent by Juno to see that I keep rolling this stone. I'd have little chance anyhow. If Talon screamed for help I'd be attacked by swarms of vultures, some worse than Talon. There's another reason. Talon seldom comes near me until I'm exhausted; then I'm helpless to prevent his having his feast. At dawn, when I'm restored, he is never within my reach, but perched upon some dizzy crag, waiting for me to try to escape, or to fall exhaused once more. Ah, he's a persistent bird, Winters."

"That's plain to be seen," Winters agreed. "But I'd have it out with him, one way or another, and for keeps."

"Not in my situation, you wouldn't," mourned Sisyphus. "Fate plays me cruel in another way, too. Each dawn after Talon has had his feast, I take a fresh look at Mount Horizon. Its top doesn't seem so distant then, so I'm seized with an irresistible urge to reach its top at last and heave Torturus from my sight forever. But always that summit cheats and moves. It tricks me, too. As I grow weary, it seems to draw closer and closer, so that when I'm about done it seems but a step or two up there. So I keep on trying until I fall. But I never reach it. Though I try

for days and nights and sometimes for weeks before I'm completely done. Try as I may, I'm always a little short."

LEE CLIMBED along a bit farther, trying to think. According to Myra's book, Sisyphus had been mean and greedy and cruel. Possibly he deserved what he was getting; yet to Winters, this torture was worse than a 'Pache Injun could've thought up. As a punishment, it was just too monstrous—even for a scoundrel like Sisyphus. Something ought to be done about it.

"It does seem you're in a tough spot," Winters said musingly. "You don't talk to suit me, some ways, but I'm right sorry for you. I reckon you've got some right to a bad temper, seeing how you've been handled all these years."

Winters glanced at Sisyphus, instantly perceived a change in his expression, a displacement of anger by hopefulness and craftiness. "Ah," Sisyphus sighed, "perhaps you are a hero, after all. Here, Winters, lend a hand. Together we can roll this accursed stone over Mount Horizon in no time at all."

Winters started to put his hands upon Torturus, but a shouting cry of alarm within him stayed his generous impulse. Something Myra had read to him from mythology about these crafty oldtimers made him sweat as he remembered it.

"Oh, no, Si-siffus," he said, and drew back. "Once I take a holt, you'll turn loose; then where will I be? No, Si; I admit I'm slow-witted, but I ain't that slow. You go on by yourself."

"You treacherous and tormenting piece of nothing," snarled Sisyphus. "Olympian gods will punish you for your hypocrisy. You pretend you want to help, but you don't do anything. I'll live to see that happy day, I hope, when you have to roll a stone."

With Si's scorching denunciation beating after him, Winters descended to Banshee Creek and his waiting horse. Once more he was about to swing aboard, when his will ceased to be his own. Sisyphus and his stone came bumping, bounding down again, made its splashes across Banshee and came once more to rest.

Before Sisyphus had got his flattened body into rounded shape, Talon swooped down and circled close, a frightening cry shrilling from its open, red mouth. In panic, Sisyphus set his tired shoulders to his stone and struggled upward.

"Winters," he called back, "there's such a thing as despair. I don't suppose you've ever been in a spot like this, but you will be. If you don't get me out of this, you will suffer. It will serve you right, too."

Lee had no answer for him, but his conscience was troubled. He couldn't recall from Myra's book that anything was said about a hero, or any mighty worrior sent by Diana to rescue Sisyphus. Maybe Sisyphus was right; a man couldn't count on a book to have everything in it, or to have everything right that was in it. There must've been a way out somehow; there must've been some promise from somebody. Anyhow, Sisyphus thought so.

Winters sat down and studied.

Meanwhile, Sisyphus continued his task, his distance reached on Mount Horizon being less each time than before.

THEN AN idea began to be born. As a boy in Trinity Valley down in Texas, Lee had helped his pa butcher hogs. They'd put hot stones in barrels of water to make it scalding hot; in contact with cold water, those stones had cracked and crumbled into small pieces.

Winters sprang up and gathered wood for a fire. He placed stones, as his ma had done to support her wash kettle, high enough for wood to be placed under it.

He knew his idea was good—for

when he had a small blaze going, Talon swooped down and beat and fanned it out with his wings.

Lee's hand went to his sixgun. If he must, he'd settle Talon's hash, once and for all—risky though his act might be when learned of by Juno or her fellow-divinities. But then he thought of a better plan, one which even gods with their cruel sense of humor might appreciate. Talon, instead of flying back to his lofty perch, settled and walked back and forth beside Banshee Creek.

He was a huge bird, as tall as Cannon Ball and with a wingspread of possibly twenty feet. His claws were longer than Lee's fingers, and needle-sharp. His beak was a great, pointed hook. His eyes were dark and fiendish.

Apparently he was hungry. He regarded Cannon Ball speculatively, and rested unblinking orbs for a long time on Winters. As if in anticipation of an early feast, he picked up sharp gravels and swallowed them, readying his giz-

Talon's insolent audacity angered Winters. Craving revenge, he took from his saddlebags a thick slice of bacon. In this he wrapped a forty-five cartridge from his gunbelt and tied it all up with a string. This tempting bait he tossed before Talon. In an instant it was gone. Talon swallowed, stretched his neck until his delicious morsel was down. He then eyed Winters with ungrateful lust for more; he regarded Lee's hands, face, neck, and eyes, relished them in his vulturous mind as incomparable tidbits.

Meanwhile his gizzard had commenced its grinding. Then there was an explosion which sounded like a tremendous burp. Talon shuddered backwards. He screamed, and black smoke poured from his gullet. Still screaming, he took off for his lofty crag. There he perched, smoking and looking sick and droopy.
zard for its coming grind.

When Sisyphus had come rolling down again, Winters beckoned. "Si-sifus, come here; I think you can take a little rest now."

Sisyphus breathed and got himself into proper shape. He flung a wary glance toward his enemy's high roosting place, then gawked at Lee. "What happened to Talon?"

"I reckon he ain't feeling very good, Si."

"What ails him, Winters?"

Winters replied unemotionally, "I think he's maybe got a bad case of heartburn."

Sisyphus brightened hopefully. "This is a ray of hope at last. Winters, what caused it?"

"Couldn't say for sure," said Lee, "but I think it was something he et."

Sisyphus stared vengefully upward, slow to believe that Talon would not instantly attack him. But Talon looked so smoky and sick, that at last Si was convinced he was to have a little respite. "What do we do now, Winters? I'm beginning to believe that Diana sent you, after all."

"Believe what you will," said Winters. "Roll that stone onto these rocks. We're going to build a fire under it."

"So said, so done," declared Sisyphus. Hope gave him renewed strength. He rolled and lifted Torturus into place, and soon a searing fire roared under it.

From his perch, Talon screamed his angry protest, but he was still too sick to make his protest effective.

WINTERS gathered more and more wood. Sisyphus with his great strength broke huge limbs into short lengths and heaped them close around Torturus. "I don't know what we're doing, Winters; but if you are, indeed, my deliverer, I shall do whatever you say."

"I say give Torturus a roasting such as no rock ever had before," said Winters. "If Talon tries to interfere—"

His threat, unfinished as words, formed itself into action. A frightful scream flung itself down upon them.

Talon's wings spread. He swept down, not at Sisyphus, nor at their fire, but at Winters. He came with claws spread and reaching forward. Cannon Ball himself snorted as he sensed a sinister presence; Sisyphus shrank back in terror.

Winters saw death swooping darkly, and he was scared stiff. But instinctively or from reflexes acquired through strenuous experience he acted. His six-gun came up and fired, seemingly of its own accord. With its first crash of thunder, one of Talon's wings collapsed. Talon thudded down nearby, fell backward and hissed in red-mouthed anger. Bullets continued to punish him. At last his evil eyes vanished to make way for a hole through his head.

"Oh, Winters!" Sisyphus cried. "You are, indeed, my deliverer."

"Easy," said Winters. He reloaded his gun. "We still have this rock to dispose of."

"Yes, by all means," agreed Sisyphus.

They sat down and watched while flames lapped round Torturus and seething coals baked and burned its underside. Torturus moaned, and cries came out of it. Then strange forms emerged from its upper side, shadowy things, barely visible. They rose waveringly, crying weird cries, their numbers legion, and lifted themselves in hurried flight, as a wavering stream flowing upward into infinity.

"Evil creatures," said Sisyphus bitingly; "nymphs that live in stones. That's why I could never roll Torturus to Mount Horizon's summit."

"Well," declared Winters, "they sure knowed when to hightail it out of there."

Sisyphus shook his head and looked at Lee. "They are not gods, I'm glad to say. Remember, it was Juno who decreed my punishment. Ah, she's a dangerous woman, Winters."

Winters was awed to fearful silence; here were things beyond his ken. But he remembered his early lesson about hot stones. When Torturus had glowed red, then white, he dipped water with his hat from Banshee Creek. With his first splash, Torturus emitted a noise like a puma's wild scream. Fissures appeared. As more water was dashed upon it, Torturus fell apart into many fragments.

"Now let Olympus jest!" Sisyphus cried.

But then came, also, his critical test. Centering Torturus had been a magnificent ruby. It had fallen away, and now it lay apart outside a ring of steaming coals, red light gleaming from its flawless facets.

Sisyphus saw it and crept forward; his right hand reached forward to grasp it.

"No!" Winters shouted. "According to Myra's book, it was because of your boundless greed that you was being punished. Do you want to have another go at it?"

Sisyphus drew back. "No, Winters. No! All I want is freedom. Am I free, Winters? Am I free?"

Lee glanced up at Mount Horizon. "If I was you, Si, I'd sure find out mighty quick."

Sisyphus, too, glanced upward. Hopefully, almost eagerly, he began a new ascent of Mount Horizon. "This time I shall reach its summit," he called back. "This time I shall see what's on its other side."

ON UP HE went, until he was a mere speck against blue sky. Then he disappeared. He would find, thought Winters, that Mount Horizon's summit had moved again—that wherever he went there would always be a horizon before him, that he would never reach its other side, though he traveled forever. But he was free; Talon lay dead, and Torturus was reduced to harmless fragments and to dust.

Winters glanced down into that mass of ruin. Still nearby was that sparkling ruby which Torturus had carried in its heart. Lee bent to pick it up but de-

sisted, remembering what greed had brought upon Sisyphus. He turned to Cannon Ball and swung aboard. "Let's go, horse."

"But wait," a clear feminine voice commanded; "you would leave too soon, Winters."

He looked down, astonished. There, saved from complete nudity by a flimsy tunic drawn close by a slender, jeweled belt, stood a young and beautiful woman. Slung across her shoulders and back was a bow, with attendant quiver of arrows.

Winters, dry-mouthed, sleeved his face. "I reckon that's so," he said. His roving eye brought a frown upon her fair brow. "Sorry, lady," he apologized. "You seem to know who I am, but you sure are somebody new to me."

She held herself proudly erect and announced coldly, "I am Diana, goddess of moonlight, hunting, and lonely places. I have come to thank you for releasing Sisyphus from his torment; also, to reward you." She bent quickly and stepped close to him, her right hand lifted. "This, Winters, is for you. This ruby from Torturus was placed there by me long ago, to be a reward for him who, in that day of deliverance which I promised would surely come, appeared and fulfilled that promise for me."

"You don't owe me nothing," Winters protested; "you keep that for yourself."

Diana's stern countenance relaxed to pleasantness for an instant. "You are a generous mortal, Winters. Nor are you greedy, for I saw you resist temptation when Sisyphus was gone. Yet when a goddess offers you a gift, you cannot refuse it."

Winters extended his left hand, palm up. "If that's your rule, lady, I'm sure obligin'.".

She placed her right hand with its gift upon his. In that instant of touch he felt an ecstasy of lightness and dreamy youth, in degree such as he had never known before.

SHE DREW her hand away. "Keep that always as your own," she commanded. "You have a long life before you. With this gift as a talisman, you will never, never grow old." Then a great urgency was in her voice. "Winters, you must now flee for your very life. You have defied a divinity, great Juno herself; she will hate you for it. She will rouse against you every god and goddess in Mount Olympus, home of all vengeful deities.

"It is here in these rugged mountains that they make their contacts with earthly things, here that they can destroy any mortal being that lives. Be you gone, then, great hero and mighty warrior, before it is everlastingly too late."

A moment later she was not there any more; instead, a beautiful fawn leaped across Banshee Creek and quickly disappeared beyond a pine tree downstream on its farther bank.

Winters heard a rumble, like distant thunder, and a dark cloud showed its edge above Mount Horizon. That was warning enough that Diana had spoken truthfully. He splashed Cannon Ball across Banshee Creek and hit for home, his route thereafter being mostly by deep, winding canyons.

"Horse," he said, "you ain't named Cannon Ball for nothing; get going."

Cannon Ball's response suited Lee. Up twisting trails he sped, down their opposites, round cliffs and along precipices, at last into Lowbow Canyon where twisted and turned a smooth hard floor, made for running. Overhead, darkness spread. Ever nearer swept roaring wind and rain. Lightning flashed green, white, yellow—at last so close that Winters was momentarily blinded and deafened. As Cannon Ball pounded out of Lowbow onto Alkali Flat, a thunderbolt struck a high cliff not far behind, and flames leaped up and turned dashing rain to steam.

NEAR SUNDOWN, in a neat white cottage on Forlorn Gap's western

rim Myra Winters lay trembling upon a bed. Westward a black storm raged. So sharp were thunderclaps, so jarring their reverberations, she felt that mountains were being split and tumbled down. It was a tempest that had commenced with unprecedented suddenness. It lasted for several minutes, then stopped as suddenly as it had begun; surely there had never been another storm like it. Its very strangeness scared her.

She was provoked at herself for having worried so about Lee when, at dusk, she heard his horse coming in at an easy lope. She was relieved, too, and happy, as she always was when she heard those familiar, anxiously awaited sounds. She ran out to meet him, hugged and kissed him as he swung down, and tagged along while he put up and fed Cannon Ball.

"Oh, Lee," she cried as they came indoors, "I've been so scared. Every second, I could see you riding through rain and wind, sometimes hardly able to cross a mountain torrent, at other times barely missed by those awful lightning streaks."

Lee hung up his hat. "It was a right smart cut-up, at that," he allowed with outward calm. "Lucky for me and my horse, we managed to be just ahead of it."

They had supper and afterwards sat before a crackling fire in their living room fireplace. A lamp burned on a fireside table.

Myra picked up a book. "Lee, you seem sort of quiet. Would you like for me to read something to you?"

That made him remember something. He thrust into his pocket, wondering if he'd had a dream on his homeward ride or a sure-enough run-in with spooks. His hand brought forth a brilliant ruby as big as his first thumb-joint.

He held it out to Myra. "Here's a present for you. Found it out in them mountains." He gave his head a westward nod.

Myra held his gift in her right hand, closed her fingers over it lovingly. "Lee, you're so good to me."

"You deserve better," he responded, his thoughts lingering wistfully upon a vision who had called herself Diana. Then he silently rebuked himself. Even Diana was no more beautiful than his wife. Rigged out as Diana and found running wild, she'd make a man's heart turn flips, just like that Diana goddess.

"Lee," Myra exclaimed, wide-eyed with wonder, "I have such a strange feeling."

"Huh?"

"Suddenly I want to run away, to hide in deep thickets, to sit by murmuring streams, to race through woods by moonlight, to be as a wild thing, living with wind and rain. Oh, Lee, something dreadful is happening to me. What can it be?"

He stared at her, shocked to find that she was beginning to look like that goddess creature of Banshee Creek. He seized her hand, pulled open her fingers, took back his gift. "That explains it, I figure," he said sharply. "It's bewitched."

Myra looked out of her mind. But gradually she came round to her former innocent, sweet self. "Lee!" she exclaimed. "What happened? Did I go to sleep?"

"I reckon you had sort of a catnap."

Myra's face was rapturous. "I had such a wonderful dream, too. I dreamed you gave me an enormous, enchanting ruby, and that it made me want to run away, like something wild."

Winters had slipped Diana's gift back into his pocket. He remembered he was supposed to keep it himself, anyhow.

"I'm glad it was only a dream," he told her. "Don't take it to heart; we all have 'em."

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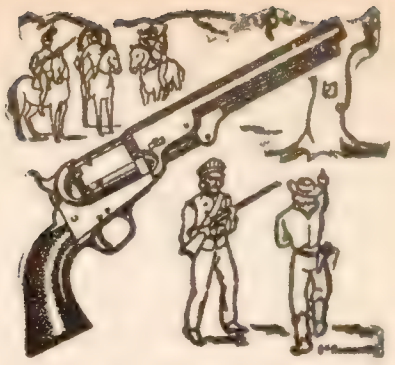
WEST OF THE MISSOURI



Special Feature

by WHITE EAGLE

THE COLORFUL days of the pioneer and pathfinder are slowly passing into an era soon to be forgotten. The younger generation of today know only that of which they have read—most of which is mere fiction. But to oldtimers yet living, the Old West stands forth in all its glory. To them it is a picture of the past, a memory often spoken of by those early day pioneers of the west.

There are yet many of the real oldtimers, both men and women, some of whom are in good health, others not. But they are all limping along, at a more or less slowly pace. Most of them are in their late 80's; a few are in their late 90's. These, now old ones, came west as mere youngsters, traveling along with their parents in caravans of covered wagons, rumbling along slowly over trackless plain and mountain country. Among these oldsters, there are some who were brought into the world while enroute to their destination. And while the parents of these now old men and women suffered much hardship during their venture into a new land, it is remembered by the ones yet living as the greatest days of their life. They all remember the then-rugged wilderness of the lands west of the muddy Missouri River.

In nearly all states—not only here in the West, but in many of the eastern states—there can be found one or more of the men and women who followed the lonely, and dangerous trails with their parents; some came over the Oregon Trail, others over the Bozeman Trail. These few remnants of oldtimers, who grew up in the West, are the ones who can speak truly of much which took place in the early days of the West.

One such a man was Norman Macleod, nephew of Colonel J. F. Macleod, founder of the historic Fort Macleod in 1874, the man credited with ridding the country of those early forerunners of the rumrunners of a later day. Norman Macleod came west in his early teens, and never returned to his home in Ontario, except possibly for an occasional visit. The old Macleod home in Scotland was Calgary, which later became the name of the second fort established by the mounted police in Alberta—Fort Calgary—in 1875.

Norman later contacted his uncle, who commanded the first detachment of Royal Mounted Police to move into

Alberta country, to establish forts, and maintain law and order in that troublesome part of the country. On his arrival at Fort Macleod, young Norman took a position with the I. G. Baker Company, famous traders, with headquarters at Fort Benton, Montana. He was attached to the store; and from that vantage point, he had an opportunity of surveying frontier life at close quarters.

Norman came west from Ontario with a detail of mounted police, under command of Colonel Irvine. His intention was to contact his uncle at Fort Macleod. Leaving Toronto on May 25th by rail for Sarnia Ont.; from Sarnia they traveled by boat to Port Arthur, then through the Soo to Duluth. From Duluth, they traveled over the Northern Pacific to Bismarck, which was then the end of the railroad.

From Bismarck, they plowed up the muddy Missouri by boat to Benton. Benton was then a typical frontier town, as well as the head of navigation, and the jumping-off place into the Northwest Territory. It was wide open, and colorful country. To the young Easterner it was fascinating, and he often went with Colonel Irvine to call at the W. G. Conrads, of the well-known Conrad Brothers, who later bought the I. G. Baker Company.

Norman, while at the Conrads, kept close contact with the party of Canadian police; and the next day rode out over the trail towards Fort Walsh in the Cypress hills. Passing the Sweet-Grass hills, they traveled past the east flank of that interesting uplift. Norman remained at Fort Walsh for some time; as he stated, it pleased him greatly, because it was a celebrated place for Indians to congregate. And this particular district had been the scene of many bloody battles between tribesmen. Sitting Bull and his braves camped near Fort Walsh, after the Custer battle; and it was there that negotiations were carried on between American and Canadian authorities for their return.

IN JULY, Norman started for his destination, in company with his Uncle, Colonel Macleod, Capt. C. E. Denny, Bill Hooley, driver, and Jerry Potts, the famous guide and scout. Right here, Colonel Macleod paused to pay tribute to Jerry Potts, hired by the mounted police at Fort Benton. He was half Scotch, and half Piegan. He was a short, bowlegged fellow, with piercing black eyes and a long straight nose. He was a man of sterling character trustworthy, loyal and efficient, and his value to the force was inestimable. He held the confidence of Canadian officers from the start, and never betrayed it.

One of the landmarks on the overland trail from Fort Walsh to Fort Macleod was Fort Whoopup. This spot fascinated young Norman Macleod, and not unnaturally, for it was a strategic point in those early days. It was built as a whisky trading post in 1868; and from that date to 1874, when the mounted police came in, it carried on a flourishing trade.

The Fort Macleod that Norman saw on that first memorable journey across the great western plains was typical of the country. The old barracks spread out on the island. There were three stores, including the I. G. Baker post. Tony Lachapelle had a combination store and pool-room. The population was made up of policemen, traders, Indians and half breeds, a missionary or two, and strange characters from hither and yon.

They were a gay, friendly, and carefree lot; and when the mail came in from Benton—along with a generous supply of whisky ordered on permit—the little place had night life aplenty. Hard drinking was the order of the day, and it never halted until everyone had celebrated high, wide, and handsome. Mails came in twice a month, except at certain times when cut off from the outside world because of weather conditions; then it was often three months before any mail or supplies arrived.

Life at Fort Macleod in the early 80's had its enjoyable side; banquets were frequent at the old Macleod hotel, and the menu fished out of some ancient newspapers shows that the natives fared well on chicken and turkey shipped in from Montana. As a final chapter on some of Normans life, he accompanied D. W. Davis, Canadian manager for the I. G. Baker company, to Fort Benton in 1883. Davis afterwards went into politics, and was elected the first member of parliament for Alberta. They went over the Fort Benton Trail by team, arriving at their destination in about a week. So much for Norman Macleod. But let us take a look at one of the old pioneer women.

SHE WAS one Mrs. Carter, who insists that her own life has been uneventful—and then proceeds to tell, providing her listeners are really interested in frontier experiences, of the many incidents of her parents' lives, as well as her own. Her father, W. B. Carter, crossed the plains by ox-team with a boyhood companion, Bushnell Bennett. It took three months to reach Virginia City, where they landed late one afternoon in the fall of 1863.

Carter had two-bits in his pocket; Bushnell was broke. The landlady at the Cresent Hotel staked them to a meal, taking the two-bits as part payment. After having satisfied their hunger, they went looking for work and got a job in the mines, working the night shift. They worked in the mines until they had accumulated a few hundred dollars, and decided to try freighting supplies from Salt Lake City to the merchants in Virginia City.

It was later decided that Bush Bennett, carrying their combined savings of several hundred dollars in a money-belt around his waist, should make the trip on horseback to Salt Lake City. He would purchase their load of goods, and have it ready when Carter arrived with the slower oxen, and heavy wagons.

A few hours after Bushnell had left, Carter yoked up the oxen and started off along the trail. After having drove some miles he made camp beside a stream. While he was busy cooking, the evening stage hove into sight, the passengers waving to him as they passed by. A bit later, after the coach had disappeared around a hill, shots were heard. Listening, Carter was startled to see a man come running down the road from around the hill; as he neared Carter's camp, he yelled, "The stage been held up and robbed, and the passengers have been killed or wounded. Come quick!"

Carter, watching the man closely while he was speaking, asked, "Who are you?"

"I am the driver," the stranger answered.

Carter, noticing something heavy beneath the man's clothing, asked, "What's that you have inside your shirt?"

The man tried to smooth his shirt over a bulge just above his trouser belt. "Nothing," he answered. "There is nothing there. Let's go back, quick." The fellow was white and shaking.

Carter, walking back with him to the scene of the holdup, found that the tugs had been cut, and the horses turned loose. Dead and wounded lay on the ground. The passengers had been lined up near the stage, and when one of them had offered resistance, had all been shot. The gold dust the stage carried had disappeared with the road agents, who had made their escape.

Later, when Carter and his oxen rumbled into Salt Lake City, Bush Bennett told him he had met two tough-looking customers on horseback, earlier in the afternoon of the day he had left, and had been much relieved when they passed him by, with curt nods.

Months later, when the Vigilantes rounded up the Plummer gang of outlaws, the driver was caught, and confessed he had showed several small bags of gold dust inside his shirt. And so he, too, was hanged with the rest

of the Plummer gang. Plummer, being the leader of the outlaws, was given the honor of being hanged a few feet higher than the others of his gang; and so ended the reign of terror which had infested Virginia City and its surrounding territory. But others, smaller bands sprang up here and there. Some members were caught and hanged; others realized that, to save their necks, they would have to leave the territory.

Carter and Bennett were successful in their freighting business. Carter later went into ranching near Dillon, and still later married one Anna B. Selway—a native of Wisconsin, who, at the age of 16, crossed the plains by ox-team with her mother, four brothers—John, James, Thomas and Robert—and two sisters, Sara and Ada. They landed in Virginia City in 1864. Carter married Anna in the year of 1868. The ceremony took place at the Crescent Hotel, and was performed by William L. M. Math, Justice of the Peace, in the presence of Robert W. Conway and E. T. Yager. As for Carter's partner, Bushnell Bennett, he went back East with his share from the freighting business. It is not known if he ever returned.

DURING the early survey of the Yellowstone valley in 1872, Major Baker—better known as Piegan Baker of the U. S. Army—got into a bit of trouble over his fight with the Indians on August the 14th, 1872. Anyway, it caused a great deal of controversy, and many accused Major Baker of negligence and bad judgment in his selection of a campsite. He was in charge of a military escort to the Northern Pacific surveying crew, and had made camp a short distance below the mouth of Pryor creek in a slough that, with the river, completely surrounded his camp grounds. The slough was fringed with big cottonwoods; at the lower end groves of willows extended for more than a hundred yards from camp. The camp was completely surrounded by water, willows, and other trees through which an enemy could easily approach for an attack on the camp.

While many criticized Major Baker for his selection of the campsite, there was at least one witness in his favor. This one was a Junior officer under Major Baker, who considered the criticism unjust. General J. Mclernand—then a young lieutenant under Major Baker—gave the following account of the fighting, and its subsequent effect on the surveyors' plans, shortly before his death.

"The night was dark; about 3 o'clock in the morning of August 14th, a few Indians had succeeded in passing through the picket line unobserved. But while they were trying to turn the loose mules in a convenient direction, to start them on a run into the hills, their presence was discovered by the herders. The darkness prevented the Indians from distinguishing the herders as white men, and the latter guided the head of the herd into the corral. So when the rush came, the mules in the rear followed those in advance, and ran in among the wagons where they were secured. At this moment the Indians were seen, and fired upon by the inner guards. Their shots were quickly followed by others; cries of Indians, here they come!" were heard on all sides, as officers and men awoke and sprang to arms.

"At first, the confusion was great, owing to the difficulty of distinguishing friend from foe. Some of the men thought the pickets were deceived as to the presence of Indians, and that they were firing at imaginary redskins. But a volley from the Indians, together with their warcries, did away with that idea. The darkness prevented the Indians from taking full advantage of their surprise attack.

"A volley of rifle-fire from our infantry, directed at the willows at the lower end of camp, where most of the Indians had posted themselves, promptly drove them from their point of van-

tage. We soon pressed forward and regained the timber along the slough, from which the picket had retired. The Indians did not try to hold it as might have been expected; they were, perhaps, surprised at the promptness and vigor of our defense.

"The semi-circle once more in our possession, we felt comparatively safe. The savages, dashing about on their ponies in our immediate front, kept up an unearthly, and diabolical noise; but as it grew lighter, they retired to the bluffs enclosing the valley on two sides of the camp. From the top of the bluffs, the Indians tried to pick off our men as they dodged from tree to tree. Occasionally a daring warrior would dash down from the hills and ride his pony at full speed along our front. I do not recall seeing any killed, but several were wounded. One pony was killed, his rider being picked up by two braves dashing along in the rear, and by them carried away, one on either side of the dismounted warrior.

"At half past six A. M., the Indians drew off, and disappeared down the valley. Captain Ball," one of the Captain Ball's sons, is still living in Miles City) "with two troops, was sent to observe the retiring Indians; but the Indians rode swiftly, and were soon lost to sight. Our loss was two killed, nine wounded; and twenty five beeves, intended for food, were driven into the hills by the Indians and slaughtered. The Indians left two dead on the field, and later admitted a loss of eleven killed. They had, as was told later, one thousand and one hundred warriors present during the attack, while our command numbered something less than five hundred. The losses on both sides, undoubtedly would have been much greater but for the darkness during the early part of the fight, which made accurate shooting impossible."

The survey was resumed by ten A. M. the next day, but the men were shaken and conditions didn't inspire confidence. The fact was plain that the escort wasn't strong enough to protect a camp once established, and at the same time give protection to the surveyors—strung out, sometimes, for two or three miles. The chief engineer decided to discontinue the survey along the Yellowstone, and on August the 18th asked to be escorted across country to the Musselshell river, to run a line along that stream, and over the divide to the Missouri.

This was done. During the survey along the Musselshell river, the man who handled the compass fell sick, and the chief engineer asked Lieut. McClernand to take his place. McClernand worked as compass man for perhaps ten days; then the chief himself fell sick, and asked McClernand to take over his work also, and locate the line. McClernand felt considerable uncertainty as to his ability; nevertheless he ran the line for two or three days.

The chief engineer promised him a lifelong pass on the new railroad, but he did not foresee the failure of Jay Cook and comany, the long delay in completing the survey, or the organization of the road. In any event, McClernand never received his pass, but he often spoke of the Musselshell country where Elk grazed in herds of more than five hundred.

In his reminiscences, McClernand, who later was promoted to the rank of General, mentioned that one evening a band of not less than one thousand elk trotted past their camp, just as the sun was sinking behind the Judith mountains. The escort returned to Fort Ellis on Sept. 30, after an absence of two months. And nearly four years elapsed before the white man again penetrated into the Yellowstone valley.

DETAILS of the Lame Deer Indian battle (May 7, 1877, and a map, was supplied to the *Great Falls Tribune* by Brig. General W. C. Brown —then U. S. A. retired—of Denver. The map was made the day after the battle (call it battle if you wish), at

the scene of the fight, by Sgt. Charles Grillon of Co. H, second cavalry. The map was found among papers of the late Gen. F. D. Balwin, and loaned to General Brown, and to the *Tribune*, by his daughter, Mrs. A. C. G. Williams-Foote, of Santa Monica, California. General Brown had tracings made of the map by the historical section of the army war college at Washington, D. C. The following story was received by General Brown from regimental records at headquarters of the 22d infantry.

"April 30, companies E, F, G and H, together with two companies of infantry, four troops of the second cavalry, and Lieut. Casey's scouts—made up men of the fifth and 22d infantries—and a few civilians, marched under command of General Miles from cantonment. The object was to attack a so-called renegade band of Indians, chiefly Minneconjous, under leadership of Chief Lame Deer, who was camped on the Rosebud—about one hundred miles distant, by the detour it was necessary to make.

"On Tongue River, sixty miles from the cantonment the train was corraled and left under guard of companies E and H, fifth, and G, 22d infantry, the scouts. Troops F, G, H and L, second cavalry, and companies E, F, and H, 22d infantry, with a few pack mules to carry ammunition and rations, cut across the Rosebud and moved up that stream. After a hard march, with scarcely a halt during two nights and one day, the Indians were spotted.

"Early on the morning of May 7, the troops surprised, and attacked the Indians near the mouth of Muddy creek—an affluent of the Rosebud, and about where the Cheyenne agency is now located. Lieutenant Casey, with his detachment closely following him, was the first to dash through the slumbering camp, and take possession of the herd of some 500 head of ponies. He was quickly followed by Lieutenant Jerome, who headed a troop of the second cavalry; then followed the rest of the cavalry."

Here can well be seen the methods used by nearly all army officers during the Indian wars—from Custer to Sheridan, Sherman, Crook, Gibbon, Terry, and lesser officers like Forsyth, Reynolds Chevington and many others. An Indian was seldom given a chance for his life, even when living peacefully in his village, on his own land, under treaty with the Government. The Indians, in self-protection, opened fire—which was responded to by the troops; later, they were called upon to surrender.

Chief Lame Deer, and Iron Star, his head warrior, appeared desirous of doing so, but not so their followers. They knew that, under treaty signed between them and the representives of the Great White Father, they had a right to live where they were, and refused to surrender.

The fight was resumed. The battalion of the 22d, hearing the firing in front, quickened its march, arriving on the scene shortly after the engagement had started, and immediately took post around the village. Firing was kept up until daylight; the Indians—now outnumbered—were forced to take flight, when they saw that Chief Lame Deer and Iron Star had been killed. The entire village fell into the hands of the troops, among whom many were killed or wounded. After burning the captured village the troops started back towards Tongue River, every infantry soldier being mounted on captured ponies. The following night, the Indians made an attempt to recapture their ponies, but were driven off by riflefire from the troops. The ponies were later taken into cantonment where they were used for several years in mounting the infantry.

Company E returned to cantonment, but companies F, G, and H, made a scout in company with the second cavalry toward the Little Big Horn, and later on May 31, returned to can-

tonment. Companies I and K came out from Glendive, reaching Tongue river May 26, by river steamer. Soon thereafter, the battalion was consolidated under command of Colonel Hugh.

About that time, however, it was understood that the Indian hostilities had ended, and that the 22d would return to its eastern station. Colonel Hugh was ordered back to his post at Fort Mackinac. The companies under command of Colonel H. M. Lazelle, two companies of the first infantry, together with a troop of the seventh cavalry, left by boat June 16, arriving at the mouth of Powder river that same day. From there a long scout was made towards the Black Hills country; later, the trail of Lame Deer's band was struck, and followed in a northerly direction for several days. The troops getting so close upon the band at one time, that the scouts under Lieutenant Casey were attacked by a large number of them, one Indian was killed. Nothing was mentioned of the army loss, if any. Later, the Indian camp was located in the badlands of the Little Missouri near Sentinel Butte, to which place the troops made an all-night march for another surprise attack in the night. But the Indians had taken alarm, and escaped. At that point, Colonel Lazelle relieved the battalion; and under command of Brevet Major C. J. Dickey, it made the now-famous march to Fort Abraham Lincoln.

GRAND FALLS was once the name for the great falls of the Missouri river, no doubt because of its grandeur and majesty. The name Grand Falls, for Great Falls, will be found on a map dated 1841, an atlas accompanying official reports of the United States exploring expedition under direction of Capt. Charles Wilkes, during the years 1838 and 1842. The Wilkes expedition is generally only associated with Pacific coast regions, and not Montana; but it has a place in the history of the Treasure state. One of the earliest maps of Montana was made by the Wilkes party, showing the Missouri and Marias rivers, Jacques creek, the Jocko of today, Flathead lake, Blackfoot river, Thompson's Kootenai house and other geographic features and marks.

The first official survey of Columbia river was also made by this party. Other points of interest for Montanans are the inland expedition, telling of Indian tribes of the interior of Oregon, including what is now Montana, and some description of fur trading activities. The Wilkes expedition was the first scientific expedition ever sent out by the United States government, and contributed much to history of the Pacific northwest. Explorations were made from California to Alaska and the antarctic regions, as well as in South America and certain Islands of the Pacific.

Five volumes and an atlas tell of this great project. Another significant feature of the Wilkes undertaking is that it shows the interest of the government in Oregon, and no doubt had great influence in its acquisition. Generally overlooked in chronology of Montana development activities is the Hayden geological survey, conducted in the northwest in 1870 and 1871. F. V. Hayden, United States geologist, was in charge of the survey conducted by the authority of the Secretary of the Interior; hence his name has been given to the enterprise.

Hayden was connected with the exploring expedition to the lower Yellowstone, under command of Gen. G. K. Warren of the United States engineer corps, in 1856. Again in 1860, Hayden entered the Yellowstone region as a geologist with a party under Colonel William F. Raynolds of the United States engineer corps, which attempted to cross the snow-covered summit of the Wind River Mountains, but without success. The permanent camp in Montana for the Hayden party of the

seventies was established between the drainage of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, on a location known as Bottlers ranch.

Ogden, Utah, was the starting place for the expedition June first, 1870. This expedition traversed parts of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. Special attention was given to the Yellowstone Park region; in a letter to his superiors, Hayden urged that this wonderland of nature be set aside for use of all the people, in preference to its acquisition by any commercial group. A scientific staff of about 19 took care of data required in official reports. Observations were recorded on agricultural resources of the territories, zoology, botany and meteorology.

MANY STORIES have been told about the famous Bearmouth train robbery, that occurred many years ago; but the nearest to the truth of the robbery was told by a Northern Pacific conductor, who remembers the event well. He was Conductor Jerry Sires, brother of the then retired Engineer J. B. Sires of Livingston. Some 35 years ago, a cache of money was found, and rumor insisted that it was the cache of the Bearmouth robbery. Varied stories, purporting to tell the old story correctly, served to attract the attention of the conductor, who had given his version. Although he resided much of his railroad life in Helena, he was well known by the pioneers at Livingston. Many times his brother pulled the train on which he was the conductor. The following account of the Bearmouth robbery, as it was reprinted in a Butte newspaper, was credited to conductor Sires of Sand Point Idaho, to which point he had later moved.

The money and bonds—pretty well decayed when found under the floor of a miner's cabin in Maxville, and placed in the sheriff's office at Philipsburg—may not be the loot obtained when Frankhouse and McDonald robbed the Northern Pacific train some 45 years ago, and are more than likely to be the proceeds of a much earlier, and older crime—that in which highwaymen shot Dan O'Neill, and which occurred October 4th 1902. This was the opinion of Jerry Sires, oldtime N. P. Conductor, who himself figured in a holdup in the Bearmouth area July 6, 1904. So, if Sires' conclusion is correct, it means that there's another buried, illgotten fortune somewhere in the Philipsburg district.

Frankhouse gave a map of the location of this loot to a fellow train-robber and convict, who made three fruitless trips to this state. This man was in Montana when the Philipsburg cache was discovered. When told of the discovery of the trunk, he exclaimed. "And to think that I have been searching on the other side of the range all the time."

Ex-conductor Sires, who later went ranching in Idaho, wrote a letter to one Walter Forbis of Butte, describing the holdup in which he figured, and which some of his friends had confused with the Frankhouse-McDonald robbery.

"In regards to the holdup of the N. P. at Bearmouth, July 6, 1904", Mr. Sires said, "it's true that I happened to be the conductor of that train. When we stopped for water at Bearmouth, I noticed a man standing on the side opposite the water tank. As we pulled out, he caught the train, and climbed up between the tender and the mail car. After the train was well out of the station, he climbed down over the coal, and into the cab, where he pulled his guns and shouted to the engineer and fireman, 'Throw up your hands'.

"They obeyed, after the engineer shut off the engine. 'Start up again, and keep going until you reach mile post 81', the holdup called out. He was obeyed. He had his dynamite cached at mile-post 81, it appeared. The train stopped at the post; the robber made

the engineer and fireman dismount from the cab and march ahead of him to the rear of the express car. There he made them cut the car loose from the train and pull it away, for a distance of about 150 feet. While this was going on, he fired a volley of revolver shots."

Conductor Sires started to walk toward the front of the train to find out what was wrong, when the robber yelled, "Get back there," and fired at him. Sires later said that that was the shot that cured his rheumatism.

"That bullet," Sires stated, "passed through my coat just under my arm, and buried itself in the trap door."

He later dug it out and kept it; but, as he stated, he didn't stop to look back for bullets just then; he obeyed his orders, and went back, right quick, to the rear of the train and told the brakeman to go to Bearmouth for help. The brakeman was afraid; the holdup had shouted that his pals were in the rear of the train and would shoot. So Sires had to go himself.

When he made his report to headquarters, they got busy and had a posse start from Missoula, and another from Deer Lodge, under Tom McTague, with bloodhounds.

"While all of this was happening, the holdup had engineer Wilson and the express messenger in the express car, placing dynamite on the safe, and exploding it. Three attempts were made before he blew the safe open. The force of the last explosion split the safe, and burst several bags of gold. That was when Express Messenger Lobe picked up a plank that had been slivered from the car by the explosion, and hit the holdup-man, who had put his guns aside to gather up the gold. He was knocked cold from the blow.

"Engineer Wilson jumped out of the car and shouted: 'Come on Jerry, we got him.' After the holdup was tied hand and foot, the train was coupled up, and started off. Reaching Drummond, the would-be robber was turned over to the sheriff of Granite county, who took him to Philipsburg. The train robber had been dealt such a severe blow by the express messenger, that he didn't recover consciousness for 36 hours. When he finally came to, he wasted no time in fencing with the law, but pleaded guilty, 'I was all alone in the deal', he said; 'I figured that if I could get away with a bunch of money, I would know how to handle it.'

"Judge Winston, before whom he entered his plea, sentenced him to 50 years in the Montana state prison at Deer Lodge. This man's name was Clarence B. Young; he served a few years, and then was pardoned. As for the money found by the prospector in the cabin at Maxville, I am sure it was the loot taken in the holdup October 4th, 1902."

This is but one version of the holdup; there are many others.

IT WOULD not be right if I failed to mention one or more of the Orientals who entered the far west, during the hayday of Montana's mining camps. No mining camp would have been complete without the everpresent Chinese, many of whom saw western life in the raw. In those early days, when mining-camps sprang up overnight, the Orientals would be sure to be there also. How they got there, or where they came from, was often a mystery.

Perhaps it was the lure of gold that brought these silent, slow-prodding Orientals into Montana. One such was Ju Jhung, who, in his later years remembered Henry Plummer, and the Vigilante days in Virginia City. He, as many another Chinese had moiled for gold on placer-bars abandoned by the whites.

Ju Jhung today, if still living, would be at the ripe old age of 99; he was born in Montana, and lived all of his life in Montana with the exception of 4 years. He was the son of one of a group of pioneer Orientals who had

followed every gold-rush in the state, operating eating houses, and laundries for the gold seekers who paid well for the services. When Ju Jhung was 8 years old, his parents sent him back to China where he remained for 4 years; then he returned to Montana, where he remained.

Ju Jhung, some 30 years ago, was sentenced to one year in prison, and fined $500, on a charge of illegal possession of yenshee, a derivative of opium. When pleading his case before Judge Frank L. Reiley, he spoke as follows. "I," he said, "plead guilty. I use yenshee; I have used it for many years. But, I have never sold it, and do not sell it now". The ancient and wizened Chinese evidently had wealth enough for his own means, for, as he explained, he had not worked for several years. Ju Jhung—and one Paul Smith, a white man who was sentenced on the same charge—were led away by sheriff's deputies; the next day Ju Jhung, together with Smith, were taken to the penitentiary at Deer Lodge where they were to begin serving a one year sentence.

Another Chinese, by name, Ah Shang, is also worth mentioning. He was, among his countrymen, what can be called one of many trades including somewhat of an Undertaker. Ah Shang took care of the living as well as the dead among his own people. He lived in a gulch on the outskirts of Butte, in 1883. His occupation was most unusual; he prepared pigs for the funerals gifts at the last rites. Extreme care was always taken to roast the pig for the departed's relish in heaven.

But Ah Shang had an avocation to supplement his income; he bought tomato, fruit and vegetable cans at 25¢ a hundred cans. Then, when he wasn't busy roasting pigs, he utilized his ovens for melting the solder off the cans; spread out and joined together, the tin plates made excellent roofing. Ah Shang resold the resurrected tin cans to his countrymen for increasing the safety of their shelters.

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These, and seven others appear in the big May issue of

WESTERN ACTION

GOLD ON THE HOOF

Special Feature by BURTON L. WOLLENZIEN

FROM ABOUT 1868 to 1886, the cattlemen in the West experienced a period of quick and fabulous returns on every dollar they invested.

The Indians had relinquished control of the West; the country was big; the grass was tall and luxuriant, and there seemed to be an endless supply of water. The range was open and free to everyone.

All a prospective rancher needed was a ranch house, a bunk house or two, a few corrals, some experienced cowboys, and as large a starting herd as he could manage or afford. Actually, many ranchers held title to very little land—usually no more than that occupied by the ranch buildings, corrals, and a field planted with hay for winter feeding the horses. The cattle were turned loose on the open range, and seen only twice a year, during the spring and fall roundups. In the spring, the calves were branded; and there were so many of them, that often the herd was almost doubled. In the fall, new calves were branded, and the beef was cut out to be shipped.

The fabulous money-making days of the open range were in full swing. It was easy to make a fortune, when one could buy a Texas steer for five dollars, delivered, and then turned around and sell it in three years for eight to nine times its original cost.

Would-be cattlemen came to the West from all parts of the world. While some of them were experienced cowmen, a great many were inexperienced young men drawn by the glamour of a new country and the promise of easy money. Some of them were not too fond of hard work, and soon established themselves as a sort of "gentlemen ranchers".

What a wonderful, easy life they led! Having established their operation, they had little to do but enjoy the glamour of being a cattle rancher, and spending their money. They would usually arrive at the nearest town several weeks before spring roundup, renewing acquaintances with others of their kind, then riding off to their ranches. After they had seen the spring roundup completed, it was back to town for a pleasant, social summer. In the fall, it was back to the ranch for some hunting, the autumn roundup of beef, and a nice big check to be collected. After that, it was a week or two of celebration in town, then back to their home in the East, or in Europe, for the winter.

For many years the winters were mild, and there was no way the ranchers could have known that 1886 was to be the last year of a fabulous two decades. The winter of 1886-87 brought great blizzards, deep snows and bitter cold. Cattle died by the thousands; fully half of the stock perished. The drought during the summer of 1887 also took a heavy toll. Sheepmen, small cattle ranchers, wire fences, and homesteaders all added to the burden. The prosperous, glorious, golden days of the open range were over, but they had done their part in pushing back the frontiers of our country, and giving us a romantic heritage which belongs to our nation alone.

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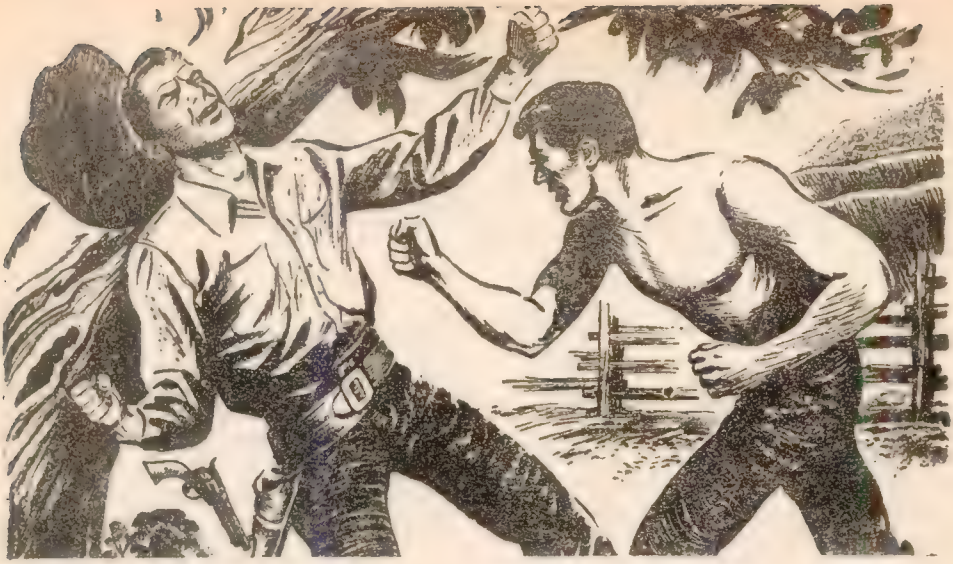

"Until Steve was killed, and the ranch house burned, this was just a case of both families throwing their weight around like bulls," Miles Muir told his crippled brother. But now the showdown had come, and Miles could no longer stay out of it...

BLOOD FUED

by GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

THE BATWINGS of the *Mesa Bar* crashed open and a heavily built man stood there, blinking in the semi-darkness after leaving the sunlit street. Miles Muir looked up from where he stood at the back end of the long bar. "It's Dodd Casperson," the barkeep said, out of the corner of his mouth. "Look out, Miles."

Miles glanced along the bar; half a dozen men stood there. None of them were mixed up in the Muir-Casperson feud, but they all knew about it; they eyed Dodd Casperson and then looked down at Miles. If Steve or Taylor Muir were in his place, the situation would have been different. There might have been the quiet warning; the leaving or taking up of the challenge; the crash of gunfire. Dodd stepped to the end of the bar with a musical jingle of spurs. Then he saw Miles and he stopped short, eyed him for a moment and then grinned. "If it ain't the *peaceable* Muir. Where's them brothers of yours?"

Miles shifted a little. "I haven't seen them for a week."

"Been delivering mail, eh?" Dodd reached for a bottle and deftly caught the glass slid down the bar to him by the bartender. He grinned again. "Beats me how a cattleman can deliver

mail. It ain't right, even if you *are* a Muir."

Two of the men at the bar hastily finished their drinks and left. The rest of them stood there, wanting to leave and yet not wanting to show signs of fear. Miles cursed his luck. He hadn't wanted to meet up with any of the Caspersons. It was just his luck to run into Dodd—the second eldest of the three brothers, the leader of the clan that included two hardcase cousins. Dodd was the worst of the lot—pugnacious and a born troublemaker. Dodd finished his drink and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "I told you to keep outa Cascabel when I was in town, Muir," he said.

Miles eyed the troublemaker. "I've got mail to deliver," he said quietly; "if I have mail for Cascabel, I bring it in."

Dodd spat to one side. "If you had any guts, you'd be ranching with your brothers instead of carrying letters."

Two more men left the saloon; one of the two remaining was drunk enough not to know what was going on. The other was showing signs of pulling leather out of there as the others had done. Muir reached for his bottle.

There was a sudden movement from Dodd Casperson. Miles instinctively snatched his hand back. A gun crashed and the bottle shattered, splattering Miles with glass and rye. Gunsmoke wreathed up from the nickle-plated Colt in Dodd's hand. He grinned. "Well?", he asked quietly.

The barkeep hurried down to Dodd. "You had no call to do that, Dodd."

"Shut up!"

"I'll get the marshal."

Dodd spat. "He quit half an hour ago; I told him to. Now get outa the way, Jim."

"Miles ain't in on that damned feud. Get out of here, Dodd."

DODD SWUNG his Colt. The heavy barrel slapped alongside the barkeep's skull, dropping him to the floor. Dodd stared at Miles again, his eyes set and wide, his nostrils flared open. "Well, Muir?"

Miles stepped out to the end of the bar, and another man left. The drunk eyed him blearily. "What the hell is going on?" he asked with a hiccup. Dodd turned a little as Miles walked halfway down the bar. The Colt followed Miles' progress. Miles stopped. "I'm walking out of that door, Casperson," he said; "just don't use that cutter again."

Dodd eyed Miles steadily. "What will you do, errand boy? You ain't no man like your brothers, much as I hate their guts." The rancher leaned forward. "You just can't face up to a gunfight."

Miles shook his head.

"Can't fight, hey?"

"I *can* fight if I have to, Casperson. It's just that I won't fight in this damned silly feud."

Dodd spat at Miles' feet. "Draw," he said softly.

Miles shook his head. "I'm leaving, Casperson. *Don't shoot that gun.*"

For a moment the rancher eyed Miles. The batwings opened behind him and he turned quickly to see his elder brother Anse. Miles whipped out his Colt and cocked it. "Get over there with Dodd, Anse."

Anse Casperson was tall and lean, with a touch of gray at his temples. Thin lines formed from the corners of his mouth as he backed toward Dodd. "What the hell is this, Dodd?" he asked.

Dodd still held his Colt. "A Muir looking for trouble, Anse."

"Put that Colt on the bar," said Miles quietly.

"Go to hell!"

There was a movement behind the two Caspersons, and the bartender stood up, holding a sawed-off scattergun. The left side of his face was badly swollen but there was death in his eyes. "Get out!" he grated; "the whole damned bunch of you. Keep your blasted feuding to yourselves. So help

me, Dodd Casperson, I oughta cut you down." He looked at Miles. "Take off, Miles; I'll hold 'em here."

Miles backed to the door and stepped out into the brilliant Texas sun. He holstered his Colt and reached for the reins of his gray. A man was hurrying toward the Mesa. It was Bert Casperson, youngest of the clan. His steeplecrowned hat was neatly blocked, and his clothing, though that of a cattleman, didn't show any of the signs of hard usage. Bert made his way in life with the cards, not with cows.

"You! Miles Muir!" he called. "What happened in there?"

Miles turned. "Go in and see," he said; "there's been no gunplay."

Bert raised a fist and stepped in close. "Good thing your damned brothers aren't with you."

MILES SPAT. He straightened the gambler with a left jab, and brought over a jolting right hook. Bert sat down hard, shook his head. Miles swung up on his gray and looked down at the dapper man. "Like I told your brother, Bert: I *can* fight if I have to."

He touched the gray with his spurs and rode out in the center of the wide dusty main street of Cascabel. Men eyed him from under the overhanging roofing built out to the edge of the boardwalk. There was always tension when Caspersons and Muirs were in town. Miles placed a hand on the cantle of his saddle and looked back. Bert had disappeared. Miles shook his head. There would be hell to pay the next time he came into Cascabel.

The thought that had been plaguing him for weeks flitted through his mind. *Time to pull out. Time to let Steve and Taylor kill or be killed.* Miles wanted no part of it. He had left the family ranch to take the prosaic job of delivering mail from Cascabel to the railhead at Dodge City and back again. It paid well enough: Fifty cents a letter, and there were always other commissions to pick up. It kept Miles out of the Cascabel area; out on the plains where he belonged. There was never a time when he returned to Cascabel that he didn't expect to hear of the bloody climax of the feud that had been smoldering between his two brothers and the five Caspersons. Dodd, Anse, Bert and the two hardcase cousins, Ike and Gurney Casperson.

The whole damned thing had started when Anse had been caught by Steve and Taylor while he was "sleepering" an unbranded Muir calf, branding it with a Bar C Bar iron. Taylor had dropped the angular Casperson with a leg wound. Two days later Taylor had been shot out of his saddle while returning from a dance in Cascabel. The only thing that had saved him from death was the fact that the rifle slug fired from ambush had been deflected by a flask in Taylor's coat pocket. As it was, the wound had kept him on his back for two weeks. Esk Jordan, a lazy M man, had been egged into a fight by Dodd and shot down dead in Cascabel. Steve and Taylor Muir had retaliated by wounding Gurney Casperson in a fight at Lane's Waterhole.

There had been other interchanges of gunfire, and one wild fist fight between Dodd Casperson and Miles in a barroom at Benson Station. Neither one of them would give in but Dodd had finally won the fight by butting Miles and breaking his jaw. Only the intervention of an army officer had saved Miles from a murderous booting. The whole affair, none of Miles' choosing, had sickened him, and he had left the Lazy M to his two brothers—Steve, who was three years older, and Taylor, who was five years younger.

There was a lone horseman riding slowly ahead of Miles as he left town. He recognized Art Pope, marshal of Cascabel. Miles hailed him and spurred the gray forward. Art turned as Miles drew up behind him. His face was swollen, and one eye had a mouse beneath it. "Howdy, Miles," he said.

"What in hell's name happened to you?"

Art looked back at the shabby town. "Dodd Casperson finally got at me. I run him and Anse out of town last week for fighting. I had a scattergun and they wouldn't buck up against it, tough as they are. Dodd was waiting out behind Moroney's stable a while back today. I didn't see him and he got at me good. I had enough of this damned town and that bloody feud; I'm heading for Santa Fe."

Miles rolled a cigaret. "Maybe you should have stayed, Art."

The ex-marshal spat. "I don't see *you* staying around there yourself, Miles."

"Some day those Caspersons will get their dues."

"Yeah. *Someday*. But not today, or for a long time to come. There will be a lot of blood soaking into the dust around here one of these days, Miles. You mark my words! Muir and Casperson blood. I've seen these feuds before and they always end when everyone is dead or else run out of the country. You ought to clear out yourself; you have no part in this feud. Why don't you ride along with me, Miles?"

Miles shook his head. "I should go; God knows, I've had enough of this mad business. But somehow I can't do it."

"On account of Steve and Taylor?"

MILES LIT his cigaret and nodded. "Yes, I guess so. Something tells me to go; something else tells me to stay. I had a run-in with Dodd today; he drew on me. I was lucky enough to get the drop on him and Anse."

Art whistled softly. "You ain't a ghost are you?"

"No. Jim Fordyce gave me a hand. Dodd buffaloed him, but Jim got up in time to get his scattergun." Miles grinned. "I got out of there in time to run into Bert; I dropped him in the dust, just for good measure."

"Gunfire?"

Miles shook his head. "Fists; never gave him a chance to get his up. I hate his guts, Art; I'll swear he was the one who shot at Taylor the night he almost got killed. It's like him."

"Sounds more like Anse."

"Anse was in bed sick that night, and Dodd isn't a bushwhacker. He likes to face a man down and fight it out."

Art tenderly touched his face. "*Yeah*. He sure does."

Miles slapped the mail saddlebag. "I've got a full bag this trip; anything I can do for you, Art?"

Art shook his head. "You've got a long ride to Dodge, Miles. I don't envy you."

Miles shrugged. "It gives me time to think."

The ex-marshal looked sideways at him. "Yeah. Maybe that's why you've kept pretty clear of this feud—because you *do* think. Where will it all end, Miles?"

Miles shook his head. "I don't know. I've seen things like this start, and snowball along until a dozen men were dead or crippled for life. It hasn't been too bloody, so far. Too bad it had to be Esk Jordan who got killed by Dodd; Esk never harmed anyone."

"It might have been one of your brothers, Miles."

"Yes. One of them will be killed one of these days. Maybe *both* of them. If I know Steve and Taylor, they'll take a few of the Casperson *corrida* with them."

Art nodded. "Dodd Casperson just didn't run me outa town because he didn't like me, Miles. I've heard rumors that one of the Caspersons was angling for city-marshal."

Miles whistled. "That *would* be something."

Art leaned closer. "One more thing: I was thinking of resigning, anyway; the businessmen of Cascabel had another candidate in mind for marshal."

"Who?"

"Your brother, Steve."

Miles rubbed his jaw. "He'd take it too, just to show the Caspersons they couldn't run Cascabel. That would lead to gunplay, for Steve would face

the whole damned Bar C Bar *corrida* alone."

Art drew rein and pointed to the west. "Here's my road, Miles."

Miles reached out and gripped Pope's hand. "I'm sorry to see you go, Art."

"I've been a marshal too long. I was marshal in two boom towns; I've been wounded three times in gunfights. I've had a feeling for a long time that if I stayed in Cascabel I'd have to kill or be killed. In a way, I'm grateful to Dodd for smashing my face up; it was like being doused with a bucket of icy water. There are plenty of other jobs. When I was younger, I might have taken men like Dodd Casperson in stride. I'm over forty now, Miles; I'd like to die in bed. I hope you don't look down on me for leaving my job."

MILES SHOOK his head. "Each of us reaches a time in life when it is wiser to leave than to fight. There are other times when it is wiser to fight than to leave. When the time comes for those decisions we have to make them alone. We're the only ones who can weigh the values."

For a moment Art eyed Miles, and then he touched his horse with his spurs. "Good luck, Miles. I hope when *your* time comes *you* make the right decision."

Miles watched the graying ex-marshal ride until he was out of sight in a fold of the low hills. There was an uneasiness in Muir; the words of the older man seemed almost like a prophecy. It was almost as though Art had opened the pages of history before the time for them to be read, and had seen something which Miles had not.

The Lazy M buildings stretched along shallow Lazy Creek. Miles drew rein on a rise, and looked down at the place that had been his home and place of work for most of his life. Off to one side was the low whitewashed log house that had been built by his grandfather, the original homestead. The walls were pocked with bullet holes, and Miles himself had dug half a dozen Comanche arrowheads from the thick logs.

Grandpa and Grandma were buried in the family cemetery on the far side of the creek. Beside them was Seb Muir, their youngest son, who had been shot down by raiding guerillas at the end of the Civil War. Next to Seb was Miles' father, Frank, who had been killed in a stampede. Mary Muir, Miles' mother—a gentle woman, who had always been closer to Miles than she had been to the other two brothers—slept beside her husband. She had kept Steve and Taylor in check until her death. Things had seemed to grow progressively worse since Mary Muir had joined her husband in death.

Miles rode slowly down toward the ranch. He still loved the place; it was his country. He even liked shabby, sun-warped Cascabel. If it had not been for the feud, he would have still been working the ranch with his brothers. But as things were, they would have ridden him until he either joined their senseless fight or left the ranch. As it was he actually had done neither; he had stayed on in the country, doing a type of work most cowmen despised. Some perverseness in him had made him stay near the feud. There was some reason for him staying, but he had never been able to analyze it.

Miles swung down from his gray and stepped up on the familiar porch of the big house that had been built by his father and uncle. He glanced through the window. Steve and Taylor were at supper. Miles opened the door and his two brothers hit the floor, hands clawed out for a fast draw. Miles shook his head. "You even jittery in your own house?"

TALL STEVE MUIR flushed. Young Taylor shook his head angrily. "Damn you, Miles!" he said hotly, "I should think you'd have more sense than to walk in like that."

Miles scaled his hat onto a deerhorn hook, and sat down at the table. "You know damned well that some of the

boys would be watching for the Caspersons; they probably saw me and let me pass. Besides, has it got so bad that you're worried about them taking over the Lazy M?"

Taylor gripped the edge of the table. "That's enough of that, Miles."

Miles eyed his handsome younger brother. "I don't take orders from you, Taylor."

"Nor from me either," said Steve quietly as he placed the coffee pot in front of Miles.

Miles eyed his elder brother. Steve had always seemed much older than Miles. There was only three years difference between him and Miles, but there were times when Miles almost thought he was talking to his father instead of to his brother. Steve was like Grandpa. What was *his* was *his;* there was never any mistake about that. Steve was part of the Lazy M; part of the country; a born cowman who brooked no interference in his way of life.

"I'm glad you came by, Miles," said Steve quietly, "I've been wanting to talk to you."

"So?"

"Where are you heading for?"

"Dodge."

The left corner of Steve's mouth drew down a trifle but his voice did not change. "With mail?"

"Yes."

"Make this your last trip, then."

Miles poured a cup of coffee. "Why?"

"I won't be here for a time; Taylor needs help in running the place."

"Where are you going?"

Steve placed his hands flat on the table. "I've been asked to become marshal of Cascabel."

Miles nodded. "I thought that was it."

"What did you hear about it?"

"Art Pope had a run-in with Dodd Casperson; Dodd smashed him up quite a bit. Art pulled out. As of this afternoon Cascabel has *no* marshal."

Taylor grinned. "This is it then, Steve."

Steve nodded. "Art said he was thinking of resigning. By Gawd, I'll teach those Caspersons to walk lightly in Cascabel!"

Miles drank his coffee. "It won't be that easy," he said dryly.

Steve eyed Miles, his gray eyes cold. "I've been waiting for this chance."

"To *chouse* the Caspersons out of Cascabel?"

"Of course!"

"Taking a public office for personal reasons isn't exactly the way I look at such things, Steve."

"Listen to him!" jeered Taylor. He threw back his head and laughed. "You've been reading books again, Miles."

Miles tilted his head to one side. "Maybe you ought to try it, Taylor; you'd be surprised what you'd learn."

"I've learned enough to fight for my family and ranch without reading any books!"

Miles shrugged. "Suit yourself; each to his own."

Steve leaned forward. "You'll finish your delivery and quit that job. We need you here; it's about time you fought with the family."

Miles stood up. "I'm not quitting the job, Steve. Take the marshal's job; Taylor can get along."

"By Heaven! We'll cut you out of your share of the ranch, Miles!"

MILES GOT his hat. "Try it," he said. He opened the door and walked out. It was getting late, and he had ten miles to go to Randall's Place, his stop for the night. He swung up on the gray and touched it with his spurs. As he rode out of the gate he looked back. He still owned a third of the place. Steve and Taylor had tried to buy him out; they had offered a good price. He had refused. Somehow his life was still tied up with the Lazy M. There was too much Muir blood and sweat in it to let it go for cash—no

matter how badly he got on with his brothers.

The sun was dying in the west, in a welter of rose and gold when Miles saw the Lazy M again. He stared down at the once-familiar scene. The big house was gone, leaving a rectangle of black on the earth; the big barn was a burned-out shell. The old whitewashed log house was still there. Yellow light showed through its small windows and smoke drifted lazily up from its chimney.

Miles spurred his gray down toward the ford, and as he rode past the small fenced in family cemetery a new grave marker caught his eye. It was not a stone like the others. It was a white painted board. The fresh black lettering on it read *Steven Muir*. Miles felt a catch in his throat. The gray splashed across the shallow stream, scattering sheets of water tinted redly by the dying sun. Miles swung down from his horse as a man rounded the loghouse with ready Winchester. It was Mack Pritchard, a Lazy M hand. "Oh, it's *you*, Miles," he said.

"Where's Taylor?"

Pritchard jerked his head toward the house. "In there."

"Is he all right?"

Pritchard hesitated. "Yes and no."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"He's alive. Badly shot up though, Miles."

"What happened here?"

"The Casperson *corrida* shot us up. Steve was killed."

Miles opened the door and entered the old house. Taylor was propped up in a bed near the fireplace. Midge Barnes, a crippled Lazy M hand, looked up as Miles came into the room. "I'm glad to see you, Miles," he said with a tired smile on his homely face. "Taylor has been asking for you all day."

TAYLOR MUIR'S handsome face was white and drawn. His pain-deadened eyes seemed to light up a little when he saw Miles. Miles hurried forward and then stopped dead as he saw the empty place where Taylor's right arm should have been. Taylor nodded. "It's gone," he said quietly.

Miles sat down on the bed. "For God's sake, Taylor! What happened?"

"Steve took the marshal's job, right after you left. He seemed to think you'd be back to help me. The Casperson's were fighting mad, but Steve had the backing of the townspeople. It looked like Steve had them bluffed, but they were only biding their time. They worked it pretty slick. Part of them went to Cascabel to hurrah it. Meanwhile some of them were seen hanging around here.

"Hell, I didn't know *what* to do. If I went to help Steve, the Caspersons might hit us here; if I stayed here, he'd have to face them practically alone, because the townspeople were completely bluffed by the Caspersons. I started in to Cascabel with some of the boys, after Steve sent me a message. We saw the fire start when we were a mile from here.

"We raced back here, right into an ambush. Jonce Wiley got a slug in his thigh. I got hit in the right arm by a load of buckshot. It was too late to stop the fire at the house and the barn. We managed to drive them off from this place."

"Go on," said Miles quietly.

"The message from Steve was false; while we were here the rest of the Casperson bunch began to hurrah Cascabel. I guess they figured that Steve would either take off for the tall timber or head out here to the ranch. He did neither; he stayed on the job."

"So?"

Taylor looked away. "Steve shot it out with Dodd, Anse, and Ike Casperson. He winged Anse, and killed Ike; Bert and Gurney Casperson did the job out here."

"Who killed Steve?"

"I guess they all had a hand in it. Steve was hit four times before we went

down; Dodd shot him in the back of the head to finish him off."

Miles sickened. "Who got your arm?"

"That bustard Gurney Casperson. You know how he caters to a shotgun."

"Yeah." Miles nodded slowly. "I guess I do."

Taylor looked at Miles. "I guess you were right all the time; it was senseless in the first place."

"It *was*."

"What do you mean?"

"When you have to deal with bushwhackers, killers and home burners, there is a time to fight." Miles stood up.

Taylor looked queerly at Miles. "What's got into you?"

"I'm going into Cascabel."

"Hell no! They'll cut you to pieces."

Miles shook his head. "Not as long as I have the mail they won't. Government offense, Taylor."

"Yeah; but watch yourself, just the same. They're running the show now, Miles. There's been talk that they might come out here and finish the job. I've kept the boys here. How many of them will you need?"

"None."

"You're crazy! You can't go alone!"

Miles turned toward the door. "I know that any of them would go with me; but this is a fight between the Caspersons and us."

"But there are four of them!"

Miles looked back. "There were five of them when you and Steve started this thing. Up until Steve was killed, and the ranch house was burned, it was just a case of both families throwing their weight around like bulls. Steve and you knew there would be a showdown some day; you got it."

"I still can't see why you've changed so suddenly."

"This has been Muir land since before the war, Taylor. Half of it is mine now. Unless I stand up to the Caspersons there will be nothing left; unless someone stands up against them they'll run this country like robber barons."

TAYLOR looked down at the stub of his arm. "Seems odd that you, the one who didn't want to fight, now has to face them alone."

Miles opened the door. "Whatever happens, you stay here with the boys—and shoot to kill if anyone tries to hurrah the ranch. So long, Taylor." He closed the door behind him and swung up on his gray.

Mack Pritchard came up close to him. "I heard what you said in there, Miles. Don't worry about the place. You sure you don't want any of us with you? I'd admire to shoot up a few of them Caspersons."

Miles shook his head and spurred the gray toward the road. The sun was gone and a cold wind swept across the low hills. Miles did not look back. He wondered if he would ever see the Lazy M again.

Lamplight made yellow rectangles on the dusty main street of Cascabel when Miles rode over the plank bridge which spanned the dry wash at one end of the town. The odors of cooking and woodsmoke drifted about him as he rode slowly toward the post office. A man came out of a bar and stared at him and then went back inside. A moment later Anse Casperson came out of the saloon, followed by his cousin Gurney. Gurney stepped off the walk but Anse gripped his arm and spoke quickly.

Miles rode past them. They wouldn't bother him while he had the mail; they knew better than that. When he had delivered the mail, the picture would change. Gurney Casperson swung up on his horse and spurred it toward the Cienaga road. The Casperson place was out on the Cienaga road. Miles swung down from his horse in front of the postoffice and took his mail bag. He opened the door and went into the office.

Orris Michale, the postmaster looked up from his desk. He paled. "For the

love of Heaven, Miles! I didn't think you'd be fool enough to set foot in Cascabel! Drop that bag and get out of here; pull your freight for the tules!"

Miles placed the mail bag on the counter and shook his head "What's been going on around here?"

"You stopped by the Lazy M?"

"Yes."

"Then you know about Steve and Taylor."

Miles nodded and rolled a cigaret. "Who's marshal here now?"

Orris waved a hand. "Paige Farber."

Miles stared at the postmaster. "That drunk? You're joking!"

ORRIS SHOOK his head. "No. Dodd Casperson pushed Paige into the job as a joke. Paige takes it serious; he raises hell with every man in town who gets a little out of line—all except the Caspersons, that is. I expect to see the name of the town changed from Cascabel to Casperson any day now."

"Is it that bad?"

Orris stood up. "Since Steve was killed, this place has been like a back lot of hell, Miles. Families getting ready to pull out. Two gunfights in one day; three more men up on Boothill. Sharpers and tinhorns are having a field-day. I tell you, Miles, this is getting to be one hell of a place."

"You want me to check the mail with you?"

"Hell no! Get out of here while you have a chance. Your family has taken enough in this feud. If you want to resign, go ahead; I won't hold it against you."

Miles rubbed his jaw. "I'm resigning all right, Orris; I've got to run the Lazy M now. But I'm not getting out of town."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought maybe the marshal's job was still open. I want it."

Michale stared at Miles. "You mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Stay here then!" I'll get Mayor Melrose and some of the other bigwigs. You'll get the job all right." Orris slapped on his hat and rushed from the postoffice.

Miles sat down in a chair and tilted it back against the wall. As he did so he saw a man pass behind his horse. It was Anse Casperson. Miles rolled another cigaret; Anse knew better than to start anything while Miles was in the postoffice. But Miles knew that it would soon be too late for him to get out of town.

Mayor Eldon Melrose, Councilman Andy Barlow, and Postmaster Orris Michale came in the back door of the postoffice. Melrose came over to Miles. "Orris says you're willing to take over the marshal's job, Miles."

Miles nodded. "What about Farber?"

Melrose shrugged. "He has the badge and the keys to the calabozo; Dodd Casperson muscled him into the job. We can always fire him, Miles." The mayor hesitated. "We need a good man in the job, Miles, but I'm not sure you should take it. Think it over."

Miles stood up. "I have; where is Paige?"

"In the *Mesa,*" said Barlow, "getting filled up for the night."

Miles took off his mail badge and handed it to Orris Michale. "I'll get the marshal's badge from Paige," he said.

He took out his Colt and twirled the cylinder and then slid it back into its holster. "See you later, gentlemen," he said and left the office. The streets were almost empty of people. It was the supper hour. Miles strode up the east side of the main street. The jingle of spurs made him slow down.

A man was pacing along the far side of the street, under the wooden awnings. Miles could not make out the stranger's features, but from his gait and height he thought it might be Anse Casperson. So far, he had seen only Anse and Gurney in town, and Gurney

had left. Miles was willing to bet that it wouldn't be long before Dodd and Bert would be back in town with Gurney. Meanwhile, Anse was trailing him, watching his every move. It wasn't like Anse to jump Miles alone. Dodd or Bert might do it, but Anse had to have the backing of his brothers or cousins to do anything that called for guts.

JIM FORDYCE looked up quickly as Muir came into the *Mesa*. "Get out of here, Miles," he said; "this is a Casperson town now."

Miles looked at the men in the bar. Paige Farber was leaning against the bar, unsteadily raising a whiskey glass to his lips. His bloated face and shaking hands belied the bright marshal's badge on his vest. Miles walked to the marshal's side. "Paige," he said, "I've been instructed to take over the marshal's job here. I want that badge and the keys for the calabozo."

The drunk stared stupidly at Miles. "You do? Maybe I've got something to say about this."

"Say it, then; Mayor Melrose said the job is mine. Now give me the badge and keys, Paige."

Paige threw his whiskey glass at Miles' face. Miles blocked the glass with his left forearm and sank a right into Farber's gut. As the marshal bent forward, Miles gripped him by the shirt front, ripped off the badge and then shook the drunk. "The keys," he said.

Farber cursed. He took the keys from his back pocket and threw them on the bar. "Wait 'til Dodd Casperson hears about this."

Miles scooped up the keys. He pinned the badge on his coat. "I'm waiting."

Jim Fordyce leaned across the bar. "For God's sake, Miles, you're committing suicide. Hightail it out of town. We'll get rid of the Caspersons in time."

Miles shook his head. "I'm staying," he said quietly, "Someone has to face them down; the job is mine."

Paige Farber walked to the door. There was a look of hate on his dissipated face. "Not for long, Muir. I'll have it back. You wait and see."

Miles looked at Jim Fordyce. "I'm going over to the calabozo. Is your shotgun ready?"

Fordyce smiled. "It always is."

"Can I count on you to back me up?"

"You know damned well you can! I've had enough of those hombres; all Cascabel has."

Miles pushed open the batwings, crossed the street toward the calabozo. Paige Farber was talking to a tall man in the shadows beside the newspaper office. It was Anse Casperson. Miles went into the calabozo, got an extra Colt from a rack and then took down two scatterguns. He loaded them and took them with him out the back door. He leaned them against the wall and padded silently to the front of the jail.

Anse Casperson and Paige Farber were just going into the *Mesa*. Miles got one of his shotguns and took it to Pierce's Hardware store. He reached up and placed it on the awning, just far enough back so that it couldn't be seen; he carried the other shotgun across the street and slid it under the boardwalk. Then he returned to the jail and rolled a cigaret. There was nothing to do but wait now.

He knew he should be afraid, but somehow he seemed to hear his brother Steve's quiet voice in his mind. *"It's about time you fought with the family."*

An hour drifted by. The single harp lamp in the jail office flickered out; moonlight showed through the dusty barred windows. It was very quiet. Now and then a horseman rode past the jail; a door would bang. Once Miles heard a coyote give voice somewhere not far from the town. It was as though all Cascabel was waiting with Muir. Suddenly Miles raised his head; the drumming of hooves on the

hard road came to him on the evening wind.

He stood up and looked out of the window. Three horsemen crossed the plank bridge. The moonlight shone on a tall white hat and glistened on the silver trimming of saddle and bridle. *Bert Casperson.* Just behind Bert was a thick-bodied man wearing a black hat. There was no mistaking Dodd Casperson. The third man was their vicious cousin, Gurney. They passed the calabozo without looking at it. Miles grinned wryly; if they had known he was the marshal they would have given the building a wide berth. He saw them dismount in front of the *Mesa* and go in. It wouldn't be long now.

MILES WAITED. By now, the three newcomers would know what he had done. He had thrown the gauntlet down in front of them. How would they take it up? He raised his head as the batwings of the *Mesa* crashed back. Dodd Casperson and Paige Farber stepped out into the street. Paige vanished around the back of the saloon; Dodd suddenly dropped his hands down for a double draw and swung up his twin nickle-plated Colts. They roared into life, sending .44 slugs whining through the air. The few people on the street vanished. Powdersmoke drifted off before the breeze. Dodd stepped back up under the awning and began to reload.

The hurrahing of Cascabel had gotten off to a good start. Miles went to the back door of the jail and stepped out into the alleyway. He went to the front of the jailhouse.

Dodd Casperson was still standing in front of the *Mesa*. He looked at Miles as he came out of the shadows. None of the other Caspersons were in sight. "You looking for me, Muir?" he called. "I just hurrahed Cascabel."

Miles walked forward, tense and ready for instant action. Dodd had replaced his Colts in their holsters and stood with folded arms, leaning against an awning post. Something clicked sharply behind Miles. He crouched and whirled.

Paige Farber came out of the shadows next to the hardware store. A double-barreled shotgun rested across his left forearm. He thrust the gun forward as though to fire. Miles dropped to the ground, snaking out his Colt. Paige weaved drunkenly and fired both barrels. The buckshot went wide of the mark and splattered against the front of the *Mesa*. There was a muttered curse. Anse Casperson staggered out from the shadows, gripping his chest. "He hit me, Dodd!" he yelled; "I'm all cut up!"

Dodd ran forward. Miles fired at Paige Farber. The drunk jerked as the heavy .44 slapped into him. He went down on one knee, dropped his shotgun, and fumbled for his Colt. Anse Casperson bumped heavily against Dodd; Dodd cursed. Miles rolled over under the awning of the hardware store. A man ran out from behind the saloon carrying a shotgun. It was Gurney Casperson. "Look out, Anse!" he yelled as he raised his scattergun.

Anse was weaving back and forth in the middle of the street. Miles got to his feet, reached up and got one of his cached shotguns, and swept both hammers back with his left hand. Gurney jumped to one side and let go with one barrel. The charge smashed the window of the hardware store. Miles fired from hip level. Gurney folded over as both charges caught him in the gut.

His second barrel flashed fire, the buckshot digging into the street. Powdersmoke wreathed through the air. Men shouted; boots hammered on the hard earth. Miles dropped his shotgun and ran along in front of the hardware store, snapping a pistol shot at Dodd. Dodd fired both Colts. A slug whipped through the slack of Mile's coat; another burned across his back. Blood began to flow. Miles sprinted for the far side of the street. Where in hell's name was Bert Casperson?

Anse pitched down on his face as Dodd jumped about trying to get a shot in at Miles. Miles ducked behind a building and reached down for his second cached shotgun. As he got to his feet, Bert Casperson burst out of the side door of the *Mesa* with his Colt flaming. Miles jumped back, fired a charge at Dodd, and winced as one of Bert's slugs drove a wood splinter from the building into his face. Miles' second barrel went wide of the mark. He threw the shotgun at Bert, and jerked out his second Colt.

Something slammed into his back. He spun about, fell back against the wall, tried to raise his Colt and then went down as Dodd fired over his head. Bert ran toward Miles. Miles fired twice from the ground, and Bert fell back over a rail and lay still.

Dodd ran forward; Miles fired. Dodd laughed crazily. There was a blast of flame and smoke from the *Mesa*. Dodd pitched forward and lay still over the body of Anse Casperson. Jim Fordyce ran out of the *Mesa* carrying his smoking shotgun, just as Mayor Melrose, Orris Michale and a dozen other townsmen raced up with ready guns. Miles passed out.

MILES WOKE up in Doc Nydal's office. Nydal was washing his hands. He nodded to Miles. "Nice slice across your back, Miles. A few more inches and you would have joined the Casperson boys."

Miles looked down at the bandage bound about his upper body. "What's the tally, Doc?"

"It was a real bloodletting, Miles. Anse, Gurney and Dodd Casperson are dead. Bert Casperson will live, but he'll never be the same again. Paige Farber has a good chance to live."

Miles closed his eyes, was sickened to the core. "I almost wish I had stayed on my mail route."

"It just wasn't to be, Miles. As long as the Caspersons were around, there would always be trouble. You did Cascabel a real service, Miles."

Miles opened his eyes. "I guess you're right, Doc."

Doc Nydal dried his hands. "You'll be going back to the ranch?"

"Yes. I'm through carrying mail and through being a marshal."

The doctor smiled. "I doubt if Cascabel will need another marshal, Miles. Most of the scum have already pulled out. I see a quiet future for Cascabel. As long as Miles Muir is anywhere around there won't be much trouble here."

"Five dead men," said Miles. "Two cripples. Was it worth it, Doc?"

"There are times when bloodletting is the only way to cure, Miles."

Miles nodded. "I guess you're right," he said. "I hope we've seen our last blood feud. The price is far too high, Doc. Far too high."

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2 Thrilling Novels

SIOUX SCOUT

by Bill Erin

HANGIN'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR RUSTLERS

by Harrison Colt

are featured in the May issue of

ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

The Hunger of Tex Malee

by Edward Garner

It was sad to see hungry Tex Malee,
Who was never satisfied.
It seemed the yield of both range and field
Could not keep his need supplied.
He ate with zest through the great, vast West,
The chuck wagon cooks would groan;
And men of cafes seemed in a daze,
And boarding house ma'ams would moan.

He called for steak and he called for cake,
And for biscuits, warm and brown;
He called for ham and the candied yam,
And drink till it seemed he'd drown.
He ordered stew and fried chicken, too,
And big pork chops, score by score,
And with no flight of his appetite
He would always ask for more.

Bad Bascom Brown had a wide renown
As one with a temper vile,
He could not see hungry Tex Malee
As a man who had no guile.
While Malee ate Brown's eyes spewed hate,
And his fists would clench and knot;
And his teeth would grind in a most unkind
Desire to feed Malee shot.

Tex said, "Let's see what next it'll be,"
And called for a ten-pound roast;
And then allowed that he'd be proud
Of a couple of plates of toast.
Brown swallowed hard, for the man was jarred,
And his gun came from his side,
With the strong intent to dine the gent
Until the same had died.

Tex was composed as his mouth unclosed
And Brown shot the hot lead in,
And he was pleased that his hunger eased
In a way that had never been.
He called a halt for a dash of salt,
Then roared for Brown to proceed—
"These rations shore do call for more,
Lead grub's the kind that I need!"

WESTERN TRADER

Special Feature

by Harold Gluck

THE WEST is rich in an almost inexhaustible vein of material that can be used as either fiction, true fact, or semi-historical. And the artist can take his brush and canvas and paint a panorama showing the different types of people who help to build the West. He might show the explorer, the trapper, the hunter, the miner, the cowboy, the soldier, the lawman, the badman, the teamster, the pony express rider, the scout, Indians, and a variety of women.

You can add to that list other types of people, and yet there is one generally overlooked. There was the trader—willing to run the risks of battle, starvation, and loss of goods; he, too, was an important factor in opening and building the West.

Some decades ago, I had the opportunity to "Ghost Write" a book for a man who had been a trader. Prior commitments made it impossible for me to accept the offer. However, I did spend many an evening listening to his tales of business and adventure as a pioneer in the days of Yesterday's West. He never carried a gun, never had trouble with the redskins, and made money.

However, we will interview a man who was a famous trader in his day. Josiah Gregg was a sickly child; frontier life demanded men who could take it. Josiah Gregg studied medicine, but his health became worse. He knew of people who had been afflicted with tuberculosis, and had benefited by a trip across the continent. If they weren't killed, they were helped; and so, in desperation, in the spring of 1831, he joined a caravan which was setting out for Santa Fe.

In the search of health, Dr. Josiah Gregg became a trader. Here is part of his story, in his own words.

PEOPLE WHO reside at a distance, and especially at the North, have generally considered St. Louis as the emporium of the Santa Fe trade. But that city, in truth, has never been a place of rendevous, nor even of outfit, except for a small portion of the traders who have started from its immediate vicinity. The town of Franklin on the Missouri River, about a hundred and fifty miles farther to the westward, seems truly to have been the cradle of our trade.

In conjunction with several neighboring towns, Franklin continued for many years to furnish the greater number of these adventurous traders. Even subsequently to 1831, many wagons have been fitted out and started from this interior section. But as the navigation of the Missouri River had considerably advanced towards the year 1831, and the advantages of some point of debarkation nearer the western frontier was very evident, the new town of Independence, but twelve miles from the Indian border, and two or three south of the Missouri River, being the most eligible point, soon began to take the lead as a place of debarkation, outfit, and departure.

It is to this beautiful spot, already grown up to be a thriving town, that the prairie adventurer, whether in search of wealth, health, or amusement, is latterly in the habit of repairing about the first of May, as the caravans usually set out some time during that month. Here they purchase their pro-

visions for the road, and many of their mules, oxen, and even some of their wagons—and then load all their vehicles and make their final preparations for a long journey across the prairie wilderness.

As Independence is a point of convenient access (the Missouri River being navigable at all times from March till November), it has become the general port of embarkation for every part of the great western and northern "prairie ocean." Besides the Santa Fe caravans, most of the Rocky Mountain traders and trappers, as well as emigrants to Oregon, take this town in their route. During the season of departure, therefore, it is a place of much bustle and active business.

Among the concourse of travelers at this starting point, besides traders and tourists, a number of pale-faced invalids are generally to be met with. Like other invalids, I was disposed to provide an ample supply of such commodities as I deemed necessary for my comfort and health. I was not long upon the prairies before I discovered that most of such extra preparations were unnecessary, or at least quite dispensible. A few knick-knacks, as a little tea, rice, fruits, crackers, etc., suffice very well for the first fortnight, after which the invalid is generally able to take the fare of the hunter and teamster. Though I set out myself in a carriage, before the close of the first week I saddled my pony. And when we reached the buffalo range I was not only as eager for the chase as the sturdiest of my companions, but I enjoyed far more exquisitely my share of the buffalo than all the delicacies which were ever devised to provoke the most fastidious appetite.

The ordinary supplies for each man's consumption during the journey are about fifty pounds of flour, as many more of bacon, ten of coffee and twenty of sugar, and a little salt. Beans, crackers, and trifles of that sort are comforts, but are looked upon as being dispensable, and are seldom to be found in any of the stores on the road. The buffalo is chiefly depended upon for fresh meat, and great is the joy of the traveler when that noble animal first appears in sight.

THE WAGONS now most in use upon the prairies are manufactured in Pittsburg; and are usually drawn by eight mules or the same number of oxen. Of late years, however, I have seen much larger vehicles employed, with ten or twelve mules harnessed to each and a cargo of goods of about five thousand pounds in weight. At an early period the horse was more frequently in use, as mules were not found in great abundance; but as soon as the means for procuring these animals increased, the horse was gradually and finally discarded, except for occasionally riding and the chase.

Oxen having been employed by Major Riley for the baggage wagons of the escort which was furnished the caravan of 1829, they were found, to the surprise of the traders, to perform almost equal to mules. Since that time, upon an average about half the wagons in these expeditions have been drawn by oxen. They possess many advantages, such as pulling heavier loads than the same number of mules, particularly through muddy or sand places. However, they generally fall off in strength as the prairie grass becomes drier and shorter, and often arrive at their destination in a most shocking plight. In this condition I have seen them sacrificed at Santa Fe for ten dollars the pair. In more favorable seasons they sometimes remain strong enough to be driven back to the United States the same fall. Therefore, although the original cost of a team of mules is much greater, the loss ultimately sustained by them is usually less, to say nothing of the comfort of being able to travel faster and more at ease. The inferiority of oxen as regards endurance is partially owing to

the tenderness of their feet; for there are very few among the thousands who have traveled on the prairies that ever knew how to shoe them properly. Many have resorted to the curious expedient of shoeing their animals with moccasins made of raw buffalo skin, which does remarkably well as long as the weather remains dry; but when wet, they are soon worn through. Even mules, for the most part, perform the entire trip without being shod at all. The hoofs become very smooth, which frequently renders all their movements on the dry grassy surface nearly as laborious as if they were treading on ice.

The supplies being at length procured and all necessary preliminaries systematically gone through, the trader begins the difficult task of loading his wagons. Those who understand their business take every precaution so to stow away their packages that no jolting on the road can afterwards disturb the order in which they had been disposed. The ingenuity displayed on these occasions has frequently been such that, after a tedious journey of eight hundred miles, the goods have been found to have sustained much less injury than they would have experienced on a turnpike road, or from the ordinary handling of property upon our western steamboats.

The next great difficulty the traders have to encounter is in training those animals that have never before been worked, which is frequently attended by a good deal of trouble. There is nothing, however, in the mode of harnessing and conducting teams in prairie traveling which differs materially from that practiced on the public highways throughout the states, the representations of certain travelers to the contrary notwithstanding. From the amusing descriptions which are sometimes given by this class of writers one would be apt to suppose that they had never seen a wagon or a team of mules before, or that they had just emerged for the first time from a large city. The inclination shown by these writers for giving an air of romance to everything they have either seen or heard, would seem to imply a conviction on their part that no statement of unvarnished facts can ever be stamped with the seal of the world's approbation—that a work in order to prove permanently attractive should teem with absurdities and abound in exaggerated details. How far such an assumption would be correct I shall not pause to inquire.

AT LAST all are fairly launched upon the broad prairie—the miseries of preparation are over—the thousand anxieties occasioned by wearisome consultations and delays are felt no more. The charioteer as he smacks his whip feels a bounding elasticity of soul within him, which he finds it impossible to restrain. Even the mules prick up their ears with a peculiarly conceited air, as if in anticipation of that change of scene which will presently follow. Harmony and good feeling prevail everywhere. The hilarious song, the *bon mot,* and the witty repartee go round in quick succession; and before people have had leisure to take cognizance of the fact, the lovely village of Independence with its multitude of associations is already lost to the eye.

It was on the 15th of May, 1831, and one of the brightest, and most lovely of all the days in the calendar, that our little party set out from Independence. The general rendezvous at Council Grove was our immediate destination. It is usual for the traders to travel thus far in detached parties, and to assemble there for mutual security and defense during the remainder of the journey. It was from thence that the formation of the caravan was to be dated and the chief interest of our journey was to commence. Therefore, to this point we looked forward with great anxiety. The intermediate travel was marked by very few events of any interest. As the wagons had gone before

us and we were riding in a light carriage we were able to reach the Round Grove, about thirty-five miles distant, on the first day, where we joined the rear division of the caravan, comprising about thirty wagons.

On the following day we had a foretaste of those protracted, drizzling spells of rain, which at this season of the year so much infest the frontier prairies. It began sprinkling about dark and continued pouring without let or hindrance for forty-eight hours in succession; and as the rain was accompanied by a heavy north-wester and our camp was pitched in the open prairie without a stick of available timber within a mile of us, it must be allowed that the whole formed a prelude anything but flattering to invalids. For my own part, finding the dearborn carriage in which I had a berth not exactly water-proof, I rolled myself in a blanket and lay snugly coiled upon a tier of boxes and bales, under cover of a wagon, and thus managed to escape a severe drenching.

IT MAY BE proper to observe here for the benefit of future travelers that in order to make a secure shelter for the cargo against the inclemencies of the weather, there should be spread upon each wagon a pair of stout Osnaburg sheets, with one of sufficient width to reach the bottom of the body on each side, so as to protect the goods from driving rains. By omitting this important precaution, many packages of merchandise have been seriously injured. Some preferred lining the exterior of the wagon body by tacking a simple strip of sheeting all around it. On the outward trips especially a pair of Mackinaw blankets can be advantageously spread between the two sheets, which effectually secures the roof against the worst of storms. This contrivance has also the merit of turning the blankets into a profitable item of trade by enabling the owners to evade the custom house officers, who would otherwise seize them as contraband articles.

The mischief of the storm did not exhaust itself, however, upon our persons. The loose animals sought shelter in the grooves at a considerable distance from the encampment, and the wagoners being loth to turn out in search of them during the rain, not a few, of course, when applied for were missing. This, however, is no uncommon occurrence. Travelers generally experience far more annoyance from the straying of cattle during the first hundred miles than at any time afterward. Apprehending no danger from the wild Indians, they seldom keep any watch, although that is the very time when a cattle-guard is most needed. It is only after some weeks' travel that the animals begin to feel attached to the caravan, which they then consider about as much their home as the stock-yard of a dairy farm.

After leaving this spot the troubles of our journey began in good earnest; for on reaching the narrow ridge which separates the Osage and Kansas waters, we encountered a region of very troublesome quagmires. On such occasions it is quite common for a wagon to sink to the hubs in mud while the surface of the soil all around would appear perfectly dry and smooth. To extricate each other's wagons we had frequently to employ double and triple teams, with all hands to the wheels in addition—often led by the proprietors themselves up to the waist in mud and water.

Three or four days after this and while crossing the head branches of the Osage River we experienced a momentary alarm. Conspicuously elevated upon a rod by the roadside we found a paper purporting to have been written by the Kansas agent, stating that a band of Pawnees were said to be lurking in the vicinity! The first excitement over, however, the majority of our party came to the conclusion that it was either a hoax of some of the company in advance, or else a stratagem of the Kansas Indians, who, as well as the

Osages, prowl about those prairies and steal from the caravans during the passage, when they entertain the slightest hope that their maraudings will be laid to others. They seldom venture further, however, than to seize upon an occasional stray animal, which they frequently do with the view alone of obtaining a reward from its owner for its return. As to the Pawnees, the most experienced traders were well aware that they had not been known to frequent those latitudes since the commencement of the Santa Fe trade. But what contributed as much as anything else to lull the fears of the timid was an accession to our forces of seventeen wagons which we overtook the same evening.

EARLY ON the 26th of May we reached the long looked-for rendezvous of Council Grove, where we joined the main body of the caravan. Lest this imposing title suggest to the listener a snug and thriving village, it should be observed that on the day of our departure from Independence we passed the last human abode upon our route; therefore, from the borders of Missouri to those of New Mexico not even an Indian settlement greeted our eyes.

This point is nearly a hundred and fifty miles from Independence, and consists of a continuous strip of timber nearly half a mile in width, comprising the richest varieties of trees; such as oak, walnut, ash, elm, hickory, etc., and extending all along the valleys of a small stream known as Council Grove Creek, the principal branch of the Neosho River. This stream is bordered by the most fertile bottoms and beautiful upland prairies, well adapted to cultivation: such, indeed, is the general character of the country from thence to Independence. All who have traversed these delightful regions look forward with anxiety to the day when the Indian title to the land shall be extinguished, and flourishing white settlements dispel the gloom which at present prevails over this uninhabited region. Much of this prolific country now belongs to the Shawnees and other Indians of the border, though some portion of it has never been allotted to any tribe.

Frequent attempts have been made by travelers to invest the Council Grove with a romantic sort of interest, of which the following fabulous vagary, which I find in a letter that went the rounds of our journals, is an amusing sample: "Here the Pawnee, Arapaho, Comanche, Loup, and Eutaw Indians, all of whom were at war with each other, meet and smoke the pipe once a year." Now it is more than probable that not a soul of most of the tribes mentioned above ever saw the Council Grove. Whatever may be the interest attached to this place, however, on account of its historical or fanciful associations, one thing is very certain, that the novice, even here, is sure to imagine himself in the midst of lurking savages. These visionary fears are always a source of no little merriment to the veteran of the field, who does not hesitate to travel with a single wagon and a comrade or two, or even alone, from the Arkansas River to Independence.

The facts connected with the designation of this spot are simply these. Messrs. Reeves, Sibley and Mathers, having been commissioned by the United States in the year 1825 to mark a road from the confines of Missouri to Santa Fe, met on this spot with some bands of Osages, with whom they concluded a treaty whereby the Indians agreed to allow all citizens of the United States and Mexico to pass unmolested, and even to lend their aid to those engaged in the Santa Fe trade; for which they were to receive a gratification of eight hundred dollars in merchandise. The commissioners on this occasion gave to the place the name of Council Grove.

But, although the route examined by the Commissioners named above was partially marked out as far as the Arkansas by raised mounds, it seems to

have been of but little service to travelers, who continued to follow the trail previously made by the wagons, which is now the settled road to the region of the short buffalo grass.

THE DESIGNATION of Council Grove, after all, is perhaps the most appropriate that could be given to this place. There we held a grand council, at which the respective claims of the different aspirants to office were considered, leaders selected, and a system of government agreed upon, as is the standing custom of these promiscuous caravans. One would have supposed that electioneering and party spirit would hardly have penetrated so far into the wilderness, but it was so. Even in our little community we had our office-seekers and their political adherents, as earnest and as devoted as any of the modern school of politicians in the midst of civilization. After a great deal of bickering and wordy warfare, however, all the candidates found it expedient to decline, and a gentleman by the name of Stanley, without seeking or even desiring the office, was unanimously proclaimed captain of the caravan. The powers of this officer were undefined by any constitutional provision, and consequently vague and uncertain. Orders are viewed as mere requests, and are often obeyed or neglected at the caprice of the subordinates. It is necessary to observe, however, that the captain is expected to direct the order of travel during the day and to designate the camping ground at night. He has, in addition, many other functions of a general nature, in the exercise of which the company find it convenient to acquiesce. But the little attention that is paid to his commands in cases of emergency is manifested during the progress of the expedition.

But after this comes the principal task of organizing. The proprietors are first notified by proclamation to furnish a list of their men and wagons. The latter are generally apportioned into four divisions, particularly when the company is large—and ours consisted of nearly a hundred wagons, besides a dozen of dearborns and other small vehicles and two small cannons (a four pounder and a six pounder), each mounted upon a carriage. To each of these divisions was appointed a lieutenant, whose duty it was to inspect every ravine and creek on the route, select the best crossings, and superintend what is called in prairie parlance the "forming" of each encampment.

Upon the calling of the roll we were found to muster an efficient force of nearly two hundred men, without counting invalids or other disabled bodies, who, as a matter of course, are exempt from duty. There is nothing so much dreaded by inexperienced tavelers as the ordeal of guard duty. But no matter what the condition or employment of the individual may be, no one has the smallest chance of evading the common law of the prairies, The amateur tourist and the listless loafer are precisely in the same wholesome predicament—they must all take their regular turn at the watch. There is usually a set of genteel idlers attached to every caravan, whose wits are forever at work in devising schemes for whiling away their irksome hours at the expense of others.

By embarking in these trips of pleasure they are enabled to live without expense; for the hospitable traders seldom refuse to accommodate even a loafing companion with a berth at their mess without charge. But then these lounging attaches are expected at least to do good service by way of guard duty. None are even permitted to furnish a substitute, as is frequently done in military expeditions, for he that would scarcely be watchful enough for the dangers of the prairies. Even the invalid must be able to produce unequivocal proofs of his inability, or it is a chance if the plea is admitted. For my own part, although I started on the sick list, and though the prairie sentinel

must stand fast and brook the severest storm (for then it is that the strictest watch is necessary), I do not remember ever having missed my post but once during the whole journey.

The usual number of watches is eight, each standing a fourth of every alternate night. When the party is small the number is greatly reduced, while in the case of very small bands they are sometimes compelled for safety's sake to keep one watch on duty half the night. With large caravans the captain usually appoints eight sergeants of the guard, each of whom takes an equal portion of men under his command.

THE HETEROGENEOUS appearance of our company, consisting of men from every class and grade of society, with a little sprinkling of the softer sex, would have formed an excellent subject for an artist's pencil. It may appear, perhaps, a little extraordinary that females should have ventured across the prairies under such forlorn auspices. Those who accompanied us, however, were members of a Spanish family who had been banished in 1829 in pursuance of a decree of the Mexican congress and were now returning to their homes in consequence of a suspension of the decree. Other females, however, have crossed the prairies to Santa Fe at different times, among whom I have known two respectable French ladies, who now reside in Chihuahua.

The wild and motley aspect of the caravan can be but imperfectly conceived without an idea of the costumes of its various members. The most fashionable prairie dress is the fustian frock of the city-bred merchant furnished with a multitude of pockets capable of accommodating a variety of extra tackling. Then there is the backwoodsman with his linsey or leather hunting-shirt—the farmer with his blue jean coat—the wagoner with his flannel-sleeve vest—besides an assortment of other costumes which go to fill up the picture.

In the article of firearms there is also an equally interesting medley. The frontier hunter sticks to his rifle, as nothing could induce him to carry what he terms in derision "the scatter-gun." The sportsman from the interior flourishes his double-barreled fowling-piece with equal confidence in its superiority. The latter is certainly the most convenient description of gun that can be carried on this journey; as a charge of buck-shot in night attacks (which are the most common) will of course be more likely to do execution than a single rifle-ball fired at random. The repeating arms have lately been brought into use upon the prairies and they are certainly very formidable weapons, particularly when used against an ignorant savage foe. A great many were furnished beside with a bountiful supply of pistols and knives of every description, so that the party made altogether a very brigand-like appearance.

During our delay at the Council Grove the laborers were employed in procuring timber for axle-trees and other wagon repairs, of which a supply is always laid in before leaving this region of substantial growths; for henceforward there is no wood on the route fit for these purposes; not even in the mountains of Santa Fe do we meet with any serviceable timber. The supply procured here is generally lashed under the wagons, in which way a log is not unfrequently carried to Santa Fe, and even sometimes back again.

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What might the history of the West have been like if one fact in reality had been slightly different? Don't miss *"Custer's Courage"*, by HAROLD GLUCK, in the June issue of **DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN.** Now on sale at all stands.

Blue Smoke Ranse was a hell-raiser, with a wicked reputation. But somehow, Judge Cain felt that the man really wanted to reform and settle down — and maybe all the stories about him weren't entirely true...

ABLE CAIN'S WAGON RACE

by A. A. BAKER

IT WAS the day of Apex's Runaway Wagon Race. The barricades—stout timbers protecting the store fronts—were planted deep to deflect the thundering wagons toward the finish line at Sandy Mash Pond. Once across the finish line, the wagons would splash out into the pond like skipping stones. As the vehicles sank, the drivers were lassoed and towed ashore; only then were horses hitched to drag lines and the sunken wagons salvaged.

This was a contest peculiar to Apex. Other mining towns, from Southern Mines to the tip of the Mother Lode, had their drilling contests, horse racing and bull fights. Apex had its wagon race and could safely boast of more broken bones and half-drowned contestants than any four celebrations in the Sierras.

This was the final race. All day the wagons had catapaulted down Apex's steep main street; each wagon carrying a full yard of gravel, and a yelling driver—supplied only with a stout hickory pick handle to apply to the front wheel in emergencies, if the driver felt it necessary to 'ditch' or 'lay over.' The juggernauts were steered by rope reins fastened to the stubby wagon tongue.

Now Judge Able Cain and Clint Bowland straddled the high seats, leaning forward on the brakes, waiting for starter Pike Peel to fire the starting gun.

It was a tense moment. The sun seemed to halt like a mottled, bloated fire ball beneath a scarf of red and orange clouds. Crowds of spectators, buzzing like blow flys around a bowl of spilled custard, moved restlessly. Salt Mash Pond was shaded by the shadows creeping out of the canyons.

Just at that time, entering deserted Swizzle Street of Apex, a man, hunched on the squeaking seat of a canvas covered buckboard, gazed warily about and became nervous at the stillness. Pushing back his California coat he shifted his Colt in the holster. He drew a bandana and wiped his forehead,

Pike Peel fired the starting gun, and the race was on!

dropping acid stained hands downward to smooth a drooping mustache.

Stenciled on the canvas wagon cover were the bold words, EDWIN RANSE. ASSAYER. The wagon braces shook and the letters shivered. Even in the warmth of the dying sun, Ranse felt a chill. Then bracing his thin body, he slapped his mules with the reins and chirruped.

Back at the starting line, Judge Able Cain, his dented stovepipe hat crunched tightly over his round face, hitched a strap of his striped overalls, glowered across at Clint Bowland, and nodded to Pike Peel.

"Jest hold it a second, Judge," Pike lowered his navy Colt. "Last time down you was a dead heat. An', Judge, I seen you throwin' rocks at Clint as you went past the hotel." Pike shifted angrily on his spider legs. "I got to see this race is fair, an' if I catch either one of you doin' one dirty thing—I'm goin'

to shoot him off'n the wagon. Understand?"

"You'd do that?" stuttered the judge, flexing the steering rope nervously. "But I'm keeping the pick handle in case I have to brake down on Swizzle Junction."

"All right," agreed Pike, "keep it but *don't* use it on Clint. I'll wing you or Clint if I see one thing wrong..."

"All right, Pike, but tell Clint to unknot those rope ends and cut them down to just enough length for steering size."

Pike spoke while shortening Clint Bowland's steering rope. "Watch out for Swizzle Street. It's not been blockaded. The Hook and Ladder Company wants that open in case there's a fire; Captain claims he's gotta have access in case somethin' starts afire. Now," Pike skittered back and fired his Colt, "your race's started!"

"*They're a'comin'!*" The miner straddling the flagpole platform shouted.

THE HEAVY wheels crunched into a slow start. Judge Cain shifted his bulk forward and backward like a boy on a stubborn plug, and Clint Bowland reached far out to lay his weight against the right wheel. Together they rumbled, imperceptibly picking up speed, until the shouts of the crowd dimmed under the gathering thunder. The wagons were almost impossible to steer. Each man hunched his shoulders and tried to yaw the ponderous vehicles in a straight line down the crooked street.

Now the wagons had found the ruts and entered the swale in front of Corbett's Feed Barn. Able's wagon had leaped ahead, and he braced himself for the dip that preceded the sharp turn at Ho Sung's hand laundry. Clint glowered as Able veered. He watched the front wheels pass; then, with a defiant scowl at Pike Peel, Clint steered close and locked his front wheels into the threshing drivers of Able. Judge Cain found his wagon jammed against Clint's; the thunder of the heavy wheels had risen as they approached the turn in a threshing welter of skidding vehicles.

Straining until a suspender button popped, Able tried to veer away; but Clint followed the escape maneuver and the wagons bucked—heading straight for the hotel. Able braked; Clint's wagon thundered ahead, but Able was free. They entered the steep slope approaching Swizzle Street. Able, desperately trying to catch up, steered out of the ruts to let his runaway wagon with its bouncing tons, graze the barricades. But he was on hard ground and felt the wheels bite in; the rope in his braced arms seemed to be tugging his shoulder muscles loose. If he could maintain his speed on the hard ground, he could catch Clint at the Swizzle intersection and could bump the other wagon into the far edge of the turn. He rose in his seat, letting out a piercing yell; he was riding a thunderbolt, aiming a fifteen ton land bound skyrocket and ready to nudge, like an elephant on wheels, against Clint's wagon.

Now he was topping into the full slope. Leaving here, there would be no more chance to control his vehicle. He had to ram Clint, force him against the barricade. Able was gaining, was opening his mouth for another shout, when a movement at Swizzle Junction caught his eye. The flicking ears of two lead mules entered the race course. Able stared; the mules continued, dragging Edwin Ranse's stained, canvas covered buckboard onto the race course. The thin man had risen in his seat, hauling frantically on the reins, his eyes bugging as the two thundering ore wagons whipped down the grade.

The judge bit down his yell and felt the air bloom up in his cheeks. If he or Clint hit that buckboard at this speed, it'd be matchstick wood. There'd be dead mules, and the mustached driver'd be squashed like a pumpkin under the ore wagon wheels.

Able Cain ducked into the box and came up with his pick handle. He stared once at the spinning left wheel. To shove that pick handle into those flying spokes could be sheer suicide, but he had to miss that buckboard.

ABLE DROPPED his steering rope. The wagon tongue tip dropped and dug into the dirt; the wagon bucked; front wheels came up like a kangaroo ready to leap, and the wagon tongue squealed and parted. The ore wagon pitched like a ship in a hurricane, but Able ducked his head, closed his eyes and hung on. He felt the wagon surge ahead. He looked up. The buckboard was now directly in front. He turned and saw that he had passed Clint; now they were both about to crash into the defenseless mules, to mash them against the buckboard and its panicked driver. Why hadn't the fool jumped?

Judge Cain moaned through teeth that bounced against the pounding of the wagon. He raised the pick handle and jammed it into the spinning wheel-spokes of the front wheel. For a second, the hickory came alive as it caught a spoke and locked against the whirling hub. Able's wagon yawed. His right wheel veered, ramming the steel rim under the bed of Clint's wagon. The locked wagons bumped together, hit the rear of the buckboard. The canvas rose; pots and pans scattered. Vaguely, Able knew, he was yelling—and glared out of the welter of debris that was flowing through the air. Clint Bowland was flying in midair; Able remembered passing another floating man with a droopy mustache, the eyes wide and mouth open with one fist clinched on broken leather reins. Then his wagon hit the pillars supporting the hotel veranda. He never recalled the porch coming down on his head.

Judge Able Cain came to. Pike Peel was straightening up and returning with an empty five gallon water pail. Able spluttered, raised a weak hand and pleaded. "No more, Pike." He coughed. "You got me half-drowned now..."

"Holy smoke, Judge," squeaked Pike, "you all right?"

"Yeah... How about Clint and..?"

"Smoke?"

"You *said* that," gritted the judge, raising from his soaked position.

"I mean Blue Smoke Ranse, the fella drivin' the buckboard." answered Pike; "he's fair. Clint's got a twisted leg and a neck crik. The wagons is worse off. Both busted to pieces an' that buckboard... Whooie! She's a total loss. But come on, you got to get to runnin'." Pike glanced nervously over his shoulder.

"Running?"

"Don't you know you hit and busted Smoke Ranse's wagon?"

"No, I don't know anything about any Smoke Ranse," snapped Able.

"He's that gun-toting assayer, and—" Pike was pushing Able through the crowd— "and he's killed plenty for less'n you done!"

"He isn't killing me!" rasped Able Cain; "tell him I'm the judge here."

"He won't care. After what you done

to his buckboard and all his gear, 'pears he'd have a right to plug you an' Clint both. Even if you are a judge."

"Where is he?"

"In the saloon," Pike pointed a thumb. "Sharon's bringin' him around."

"Let's go over there." The judge stepped firmly off the shattered boardwalk muttering, "A good offense is the best defense."

SHARON'S SALOON was crowded. The subdued chatter halted as the judge entered. Eyes lowered then raised and, like a preacher's pointer, were directed to the poker table where the limp frame of the mustached man lay.

"S'matter?" growled Able defiantly. "He hurt?"

"Nope," answered Buster Sharon looking up, turning to a pan of cold water and wringing out another bar towel. "He ain't hurt..." Buster looked down queerly. Able saw Ranse's blue eyes open, faded blue eyes with grayish white pupils.

The judge halted staring into the dazed eyes. Killer's eyes, unblinking, the white pupils like holes disappearing into a festered brain. He'd heard of this man, a legend in the gold fields. A master hand with the tubes and acids of the assayer's trade, and too willing to push aside his little bottles to draw a sixgun. A lone-wolf man—hating everything, except perhaps those acids and the smooth feel of rich ore. The miners of the mountains, queasy of his guns, had kept Blue Smoke Ranse on the move. They'd suffer his presence, use his services in emergencies, but always with a cold shoulder pointing the road out of camp. And something within Smoke Ranse had told him when it was time to move on—but only after the blued steel of his sixgun barked. As though he'd say, you don't like me and don't want me. I'll move on but I'll leave something to remember me by. His Colt, smoking slowly, had given him his name. History would know of him by a close examination of the headstones in weed grown cemeteries.

"You've come to?" blurted the judge. As he saw the eyes narrow, he added bluntly. "Are you looking for some hide off of Clint Bowland or me?"

"Damned right!" Ranse came off the table his gun arm raised, the Colt held in a fist of fury.

Able Cain was ready; he dropped his shoulder, caught the hammering Colt across his withers and upended Smoke Ranse. The man's feet wrenched in midair, and Able looked around like a hungry bear searching for someplace to eat his captive.

Sharon's storeroom door faced him. Without hesitation, the judge worked his flailing burden through the door, slamming it behind them. The men outside heard the bellow of the judge, muffled but heated. "You want to fight—then get to it!"

The door shook. Dust raised by shuffling feet seeped from under the crack. Once the wall shook as bodies jammed against the broad uprights. Finally the muffled roar of Ranse's Colt coughed from the room—six rocketing shots that left the watchers breathlessly watching the door.

Minutes crawled by. The backbar mirror had stopped shivering; the glasses were restacked by the nervous bartender. Someone gurgled a free drink from an open bottle, the sounds of his swallowing loud in the tense room.

Then the hinges creaked. The door opened. Smoke Ranse, his face twisted as he worked a tooth lose from a swelling jaw, emerged. Then like an overstuffed shadow, Judge Able Cain came out. He was smiling as he pulled a dislocated finger into position. He carried Ranse's Colt and to the amazement of the spectators, reached forward and pushed the gun back into Ranse's holster. With a wide armed flourish, Able shouted.

"Buster, get rid of that dam' bar towel. I'm buying Mr. Ranse—Apex's

new assayer—a drink. Hell," he turned in pure relief, "I'm buying everybody a drink!"

Smoke Ranse, searching his vest for a tobacco sack, answered. "Thank you, Judge; I'll drink with you and the citizens of Apex." He smiled, the thinly-defiant smile of a pleading man. "Yes, opening an office here. Assaying done fair and honest. Fees nominal. Any objections, fellas?"

No one answered. Puzzled, they had seen two fighting men enter that store room, heard a knockdown battle—and now... What the hell had made the change? They drank in silence then carefully drifted out of the saloon.

"I THOUGHT your leg was broke?" The judge was having his breakfast in the hotel kitchen, his big form almost completely hiding Pike Peel. Facing him stood Clint Bowland. The two visitors remained silent until the judge blew on his saucer then let the smoking coffee drain into his mouth.

"Pulled the muscles some," answered Clint, "but it ain't broke. That was some race, eh Judge?"

"Sure," laughed the judge. "Except for Smoke Ranse. When I saw that buckboard come out of Swizzle Street..."

"We come to talk about Ranse," interrupted Clint. Behind him, Pike nodded, his eyes cold.

"What's he done?" asked Able Cain.

"In Apex? Nothin' yet," spat Pike morosely. "But he was last run out of Plymouth after killin' a man. He disappeared for maybe three months; then he shows up here, an' figures to set up an assayer's office."

"We can use one." The judge calmly poured his saucer full.

"Not his kind, Judge." Clint limped around the table. "He's a crook as well as a killer—an' maybe more of a crook even than he is a gunman. I say, run him out."

"A fellow comes to Apex," the judge looked up, "and danged near gets killed. What's he done?" The judge rose and spoke in rich solemn words. "This is a frontier, a wild land being settled by brave men. What man among us can look back with pride on his past? A fella has to find his niche sometime. Works hard, earns himself a place. Why not Smoke Ranse?"

"You'd harbor a mad dog?" Clint objected heatedly. "You'd give a sidewinder a second bite? You'd invite Satan to address a prayer meetin'?" Well them things is no worse than allowin' Smoke Ranse to settle in Apex. You want to say a few words over the grave of his next victim?" Suspicion entered his voice. "An' there in Sharon's back room? You make some deal with Ranse?"

"All right!" snapped the judge, "state something specific. What's he done? Name places, state facts. Remember, a mean dog learns to get along with those who care for him. Who's he killed?"

"In Jackson, a fella give him a sample for assayin'," began Clint. "Ranse told him it never run no more'n ten dollars to the ton. That miner quit the claim, plumb disgusted. Ranse tipped off a promotor who jumped the mine. Inside of two weeks he took out a pocket runnin' heavy in free gold. Fourteen thousand dollars!"

"Free gold?" answered Able. "Isn't Jackson pocket country? Ranse could have made an honest assay of what the miner brought in."

"Maybe, 'ceptin' the miner didn't think so. Drew on Ranse an' was killed in cold blood."

"What'd you do, Clint, say a man said *you* was a liar and drew a gun?"

"That ain't what I'm gettin' at," swore Clint. "Another thing about Ranse. When he left Plymouth he settled in Mosquito Bar. A stock promoter there took an old grindstone—brung clear from Colorado—an' ground it up. Ranse assayed it at fifty dollar ore.

That grindstone was dark green rock with some blende and some quartz. Shows pure an' simple Ranse is a crook. Guess he figured the promoter wanted a high assay to help him sell shares."

"He kill the promoter?" asked Able.

"Naw. The fellas who bought his phoney stock—they hung him."

"Ranse done a public favor there," grunted the judge.

"That ain't the point," Clint growled; "we just don't want him here."

"Tell you what," Able wiped his hands on the napkin and took Clint by the shoulder. "Your story has touched me. I'll test this Blue Smoke Ranse. Two ways we'll test the man. First as an assayer—then as a killing man. All right, Clint? If he passes both tests we'll keep him—like we'd keep a biting dog—and Apex'll have its own bonafide assayer."

"How. . . ?"

THE JUDGE stared around the room. Then with quick steps he reached the doorway. He lifted a huge Indian floor pot, one of a pair that graced the hotel entrance, upended it and shook out the sand and cigar butts. "This," he studied the ornate painting on the brittle clay, "is a Wewuk bowl. It's been sitting right here ever since I've been living in Apex. It's mud—dried mud. Pike," he turned to the round-eyed deputy. "Take this out, find a mortar bowl, grind this bowl into dust; then bring it back here. We'll let Clint take it over to Ranse for an assay. That a fair test, Clint?"

"Done!" smiled Clint Bowland and limped through the door. He turned, frowning. "But how'll that test Ranse the killin' man?"

"We'll see what comes of the assay of that mud jug—first."

Smoke Ranse ran the assay. The judge located a Bear Mountain prospector, Perk Davis, and the solemn gold hunter had blandly accepted the crumbly Wewuk dust and passed it on to Smoke Ranse as detrious from a lava seepage.

While the townsfolk waited, tongue in cheek, Edwin Ranse plied his acids, his heat and thumbed through his books. The waiting was intolerable until finally Ranse left his office and stalked up Main Street. Those sunken eyes seeking out and studying the lowered eyes of men he passed. Reaching Sharon's, Ranse turned and glared down at the gathering men.

"I'm looking for Perk Davis." Ranse's dark face was flushed.

"Took off for his claim." The judge was elbowing his way through the crowd. "Left word you were to turn over his assay report to me."

"That's confidential, Judge."

"What's the assay?" It was Clint Bowland's voice, charged with suspicion. Able turned. Clint was braced, standing to the side. His gun hand curling over a holstered Colt.

"Don't think you're bluffin' this town!" Clint was wound up, spitting threat. "You killed a man in Plymouth an' another in Jackson. The judge wants that report right now. Give it, or. . ."

"Stay outa this, Clint," ordered the judge. "This is my business. I asked for the report. He elbowed Clint off balance, extracted the colt and shoved Clint back into the crowd. "Ranse, are you giving me Perk Davis' assay, or. . . ?"

Smoke Ranse tensed, his long arms drew upward and hovered over his twin guns. He glared out then his eyes lost their depth and his face softened. His right hand delved into his shirt pocket, the acid stained fingers withdrawing a white paper.

"You got the drop, Judge." The thin hand held out the paper.

Clint Bowland stepped quickly forward and snapped the report from Ranse's hand. With shaking fingers he unfolded the report and then, without hesitation read aloud. "Assay of sam-

ple received July 19th this year from Perk Davis, reported to be sample of seepage from under Lave Cap of mine located in the vicinity of Bear Mountain." Clint's eyes ducked ahead, then he straightened and in an ominous voice asked. "You back up this report, Ranse? Take full responsibility? Swear this is a complete an' honest report of the sample presented by Perk Davis?"

SMOKE RANSE studied the flushed face of Clint Bowland. A puzzled strain tightened his lips, the mustache twitched. "What the hell's the matter with you? Of course it's an honest report." He paused slightly. "I don't make any other kind."

"Well!" Clint blew the word out. "Listen to the report on a *mud Wewuk vase!* He turned to the crowd. "We—the judge, Pike an' myself—ground up that old Wewuk Indian jug in the hotel lobby. Every man here's seen that jug, most of us've fallen over it one time or..."

"Read the damned report!" the judge exploded.

"One ounce!" shouted Clint turning back to the paper. "One ounce of gold to every pound of sample! That's his report—the dirty, lyin'..."

"Read it *all,*" boomed the judge.

"Sample queerly composed—stained with vegetable matter—clay predominate—if ore body is in depth, this claim should be a rich producer. Further assays needed to direct operations." Clint tore the paper and threw the parts away. "Well, Judge, was I right?"

Sorrowfully, the judge stared at Ranse. There was no out; Ranse was a crook. Obviously, the assayer thought Perk Davis a dummy who would allow frequent samples to be run and thereby enriching the assayer. And the report sounded so realistic. Couched in tantalizing terms that would be acceptable. All Clint Bowland's warnings, his suspicions, were borne out.

The judge turned away, whirling as he passed Clint and shoving the gun back in his holster. He had done this once for Ranse—as they'd walked out of Sharon's back room. Then he had been willing to give Smoke a break. Locked in that back room, they'd fought—traded stinging blows until Able had hammer-locked the assayer and driven the man to the floor. Then Ranse had loosed his Colt, had broken free and in the darkness, fired six roaring slugs into the floor.

"I'm through, Mister." Ranse's whisper had stung through the darkness. "This is the last time I'll fight. You never rammed my wagon on purpose—I drove out and got hit. When you came in, I blew up—talked fight. And all the time I was forgetting what I had promised Nelly..."

"Nelly?" Able had spit a broken tooth.

"We were married three months. I left her in Sacramento. Came up here to Apex to get settled. To start here new—then Nelly and me could've had a home. A decent place to do my work..."

Able Cain strode slowly toward the hotel as he remembered the hollow words in the dark back room. Ranse's plea to be left alone, to bury his past, his gun fighting reputation so that the confidence of a young wife would be rewarded. And now...?

The judge turned. The crowd was ominously moving up onto the porch and surrounding the stolid, lonely figure. Each man wary of those holstered guns, yet the spark was ready to explode. Clint—or some other hothead—would make a grab for Ranse. Then the guns would hammer...

"Pike!" the judge shouted for his deputy.

"Right here." The high voice sounded from the bell tower.

The men followed the judge's eyes upward. Pike was cradling his rifle, seated nonchalantly, booted legs dangling.

"Lock up Ranse," shouted the judge.

"Disperse that crowd then lock him up, damn it!"

"Get *back*." Pike rose and cocked the rifle, letting it wave hip level over the crowd.

"Ride him out on a rail!" shouted Clint and swarmed onto Ranse.

SMOKE RANSE was slammed against a beam. Clint hit out and drove the thin man into the street, flattening him in the dust. Ranse fought to his feet then raised thin arms and faced the huge Bowland. Clint charged. A miner kicked at Ranse's ankle. Ranse faltered and staggered. Clint was a pile driver gone crazy, driving Ranse into the ground.

Again Ranse rose, bleeding over both eyes but defending himself by planting a fist against the rushing jaw of Clint Bowland. Like a slugged ox, Clint went down. Ranse drew back, knobby elbows bent and thin fists raised. Through bleeding lips he growled out at the ring of tormentors. "Step out, you varmints, who's next?"

Judge Cain paused doubtfully now. This thin-mustached man, gory from manhandling, but facing up to a mob. *Could* he be the double-dealing crook they claimed he was? A man who is wrong loses courage when challenged. Yet, Blue Smoke Ranse—a known gunfighter—had accepted his beating; stood up to Clint Bowland and the crowd—and hadn't drawn those holstered Colts!"

"Pike!" roared the judge. "I said to lock that man up!"

From the tower, Pike fired a shot that sang over the heads of the crowd. They retreated. "Ranse, you drop that gunbelt," the deputy ordered. "Then walk over to Quinn's ice house an' stand there till I get down."

Ranse obeyed. The gunbelt slipped to the street and the battered man walked slowly toward Quinns. From his sprawled position, Clint swore as he was raised and helped into the saloon. The judge continued to the hotel.

"They're plannin' a jail break tonight." Pike Peel sat on the edge of Able's tumbled bed. The judge was propped against a pair of pillows and working on his boots. "The word's out—to ride Ranse out of town on a rail—but..." Pike was cynical. "Fore it's gone far, they'll stretch his neck with a rope."

"We can stop that!" blared the judge angrily.

"Sure, Judge, an' maybe kill some citizens. Elections comin' up."

"And we need all the voters, eh Pike?" Able grumbled.

"But Ranse promised me!" the judge startled Pike by adding. He saw Pike's puzzled look and explained the events that occurred in Sharon's back room. Of Ranse's plea for a chance to settle down, his hopes for a peaceful home for Nelly. His promise never to use his guns again.

"And he never," the judge ended. "He could have plugged Clint—even fought his way out of town. Yet he never drew. He just took a beating and then let you lock him up."

"Could be..." Pike began. "Could be he made a mistake on that assay—a honest mistake?"

"And then decided to suffer for his mistake," joined in the judge. "A real man, trying to straighten out, might do just that. Instead of fighting he might say to himself, *I pulled another bloomer—what I get, I got coming.*"

"Could of, Judge, ceptin' it was an awful big mistake."

"Dunno." Able walked to the door. "You get some pitch flares. Light up Main Street until it's like daylight, then bang on the fire bell. We got to give Ranse one more chance!"

AN HOUR later, Judge Able Cain, his shadow wavering against the glare of pitch torches, stood on the hotel balcony. Below him, upturned faces of Apex's citizens waited. There was a

wash tub of water and a gleaming gold pan reflected in the burning torch beside him.

"Who's the best miner in Apex?" his shouted question caused the curious faces to turn and stare at their neighbor. "Don't just stand there! Who's the best miner in Apex?" he shouted again.

"Jug Porter?" the answer rose fretfully. "But what the...?"

"Get Jug up here," ordered the judge.

A barrel shaped, white haired veteran of the mines was hoisted up onto the balcony.

"Now," Able demanded, "dump the sand out of that Wewuk vase—there by the hotel door—and pass it up here." The vase joined Able and Jug Porter on the balcony. "We got a mortar and pestle here," he said. "Jug's going to crush that vase, then he's going to pan it out. And you down there. All of you watch what Jug's doing."

Porter mashed the vase in the mortar with the pestle. He pounded the vase into a fine powder. Filling the gold pan, carefully he dipped it into the washtub and slowly revolved the loaded vessel. Long restless minutes passed and then Jug Porter raised from his stoop and passed the pan to the judge.

Silently, Able Cain dipped a handful into the pan of water and revolved the black sand. In the glare of the light, tiny golden flakes were visible. Able dribbled the water out and held the pan high. A hushed gasp rose, then a muttering.

"There it is!" Able Cain spoke slowly. "You see it Clint?"

"Yeah, Judge." Clint's apologetic tone drifted up. "Ranse was right. The sample we give Perk must've had gold in it like he said."

"Everybody understand?" Able asked. "To test Ranse, we used the other Indian vase. He ran his tests and came up with a good showing of gold, just like Jug Porter just did. Appears the mud and clay used by those old Wewuks had plenty of gold dust in their mixings. We were all suspicious of Smoke Ranse on account of the stories we heard. We were like those other gold camps—all ready to run a damned good assayer out of Apex without giving him a chance. Then some of you tonight were fixing to hang Ranse. Now, what'll we do?"

"Let him stay in Apex!" shouted Clint Bowland. "And if he's a forgivin' man, I'll buy him a drink. Right now."

"And," shouted the twangy Missouri voice from Quinn's icehouse, "I'll drink to you all—and buy the second one myself!"

★

Two Triggerswift Novelets

THE OVERLAND DEATH
by Pidge Short

FOR VENGEANCE ALONE
by Lauran Paine

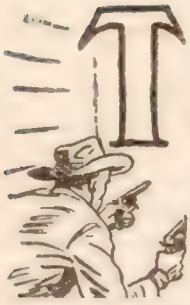
lead off the June issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

THEY AIN'T GONNA LYNCH MY MAN

A Tale of Doc Holliday and Big-Nose Kate

by Will Watson



THEY HAD Doc Holliday in jail in Fort Griffin, and they were going to lynch him for killing a gunman named Ed Bailey. Holliday and Bailey had been gambling in a saloon, and Doc had accused Bailey of cheating. When the gunsmoke and roar had cleared away, Ed Bailey was a very dead man, for the dentist never missed; and before he knew what had happened, Doc Holliday was in the local calaboose.

"They's talk about lynchin' you, Holliday," the sheriff grumbled. "Bailey was well-liked, he was, an' he has lots of friends."

And to this Doc Holliday, of course, could say and do nothing; he wished his friend, Wyatt Earp, were in Fort Griffin—but Earp was in Dodge City. By the time word of this got to Earp, he, Holliday, would have a limber neck.

But Holliday had reckoned without his sweetheart, Kate Fisher.

Big Nose Kate, they called her, and she had met Doc in Dodge, where she had been what was called at that time a "dance-hall girl." She had immediately fallen in love with the consumptive dentist-turned-gunman, and she had followed Doc to Fort Griffin. Now her lover was in jail, waiting for the hangman's noose, and the bars were thick and closely spaced...

"Well," said Doc Holliday, "I haven't long to live, anyway. This consumptive bug is having a field-day on my carcass. You going to protect me, Sheriff."

"Sure," the sheriff said; "oh, sure."

"You don't sound too enthusiastic, Sheriff."

"My bunions are actin' up almighty rough today," the sheriff returned, aiming to head downtown to listen to the lynch talk and to mooch some free drinks. "Deputy, you take over an' watch the prisoner."

"I'd like to go down town with you, Sheriff."

"You'd jes' git drunk on me," the sheriff said. "You mooch too many drinks, fella; this job needs a sober an' reliable head an' gun-arm."

And with this, the sheriff left to get his free drinks.

"You think they'll get a necktie party up for me?" Doc Holliday asked the deputy. "My neck is almighty touchy; I have trouble wearing a stiff collar, even if I don't wear a tie."

"You should have stayed with drilling teeth," the deputy said dejectedly, sinking into a chair and promptly going to sleep. Soon he was snoring like a saw running through an oak knot.

Doc Holliday, sick and sorry, contemplated his fate, sitting in a cell in a strange town, and not knowing that Big Nose Kate was now in Fort Griffin. Big Nose had her own ideas about Doc Holliday; she had fallen in love with the slender consumptive when she had first met him in Dodge City a few months before. Their courtship

and love affair had been a boisterous one, and Doc had once summoned all his strength to put her across his bony knees and paddle her ample bottom.

That had happened in their hotel room in Dodge, where they had been living as man and wife. Big Nose Kate had hollered and kicked, but Doc had worked her over to his satisfaction. Later on in the saloon where she worked, she pulled her dress high to show the blue marks left by the gunman's bony hand.

"I do declare," she would state, "but I think that man loves me."

NOW THERE was lynch talk, and a necktie party was to honor her lover. Big Nose Kate sipped her beer, listened, and did some thinking. The main thing, she reasoned, was to get everybody away from the jail. And what would be the best way to accomplish that?"

She sipped again and did some more thinking. The bar wherein the lynch talk was taking place was part of a hotel. She had a room upstairs. Well, now, that room— She had her plan, then.

She went upstairs, and men's eyes followed her pretty legs. She had a big nose—for Nature had endowed her with an awesome snoozle—but she had a beautiful body, and she knew it. Right now, however, she was not interested in masculine stares. She went to her room, piled up some old newspapers she got out of a linen closet, and to these she added other things—the sheets from the bed and doilies from the center table and the dresser. She took the kerosene lamp, unscrewed the wick, she trailed kerosene around the room, throwing some on the wall directly over the heap of old newspapers. Then she said to herself, "Here goes nothing," and set the mess on fire.

She did not hesitate long, just stayed only long enough to see that the fire burned well, then she went down the backstairs to the alley, where she stood and watched.

Soon, flames shot out of the window in her room. Smoke rolled out, and with it were more scarlet tongues of ugly flame. It was a frame building, dried by the hot sun and the hotter wind of the plains, and soon the back end was burning right smartly.

Somebody screamed, "The hotel—it's on fire!" A man dashed into the bar, his excited words momentarily extinguishing the lynch talk. A fire was a fire—and fire had to be fought.

Big Nose Kate had getaway horses saddled and ready, so she now went to the jail. The excitement had not awakened the deputy; she shook him awake and he opened his eyes wide at the sight of a woman standing over him with a sixshooter in her hand.

"Got a present for you, fella!"

"A—present?"

"Yeah, and here it is!"

The barrel of the pistol made a loud noise on an empty skull; the deputy went back to sleep, and forgot his prisoner and his family and his job. The keys hung on a ring hooked over a

nail in the wall, and soon Doc Holliday was free.

"Sure glad to see you, Katie girl. You rode over from Dodge City, I take it."

"Followed you into town, found out you was in trouble—and here is little Big Nose Kate. Our hosses is in the back."

"I'll take my guns from the rack. Say, honey, you must love me at that, even though I did paddle your behind."

"Nobody is gonna lynch my man."

They got away from Fort Griffin, without lead following them, and once in Dodge Big Nose Kate got plastered. She picked up with a young Texas cowboy at a bar, and this made Doc Holliday mad. "I ought to take you out in the alley and paddle you," he said.

"You paddled me onct, Doc, but you ain't man enough to paddle me again. Far as I'm concerned, you can get to hell outa my life."

"I don't want no trouble." The young Texan had heard of Doc Holliday's fast and deadly gun.

Big Nose Kate pulled her friend close; he had a wallet full of greenbacks and golden eagles.

"Honey boy, this man don't mean nothin' in my life. How about orderin' me a new drink, boy. This one isn't strong enough. Goodby, Holliday."

Doc Holliday walked away—puzzled, as man always is puzzled at womanhood. He did not know that Big Nose Kate was just making him jealous. Yes...and she wanted the greenbacks and the eagles this Texan sported.

Later that night, she came to Doc's room and sat on the bed. She was pretty drunk and sleepy. "How are you, Doc?"

"Okay."

"You mad at me."

"Yes."

She leaned over and kissed him. "I'm glad you're mad at me," she said; "you see, Doc, I love you."

Doc kissed her in return. "You sure take a funny way to show your love," he said; he was still mystified.

★

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The price of Grady Murrell's life was a constant alertness for ambush...

POWDERSMOKE PILGRIMAGE

by REUBEN JENNER

HE WASTED no time. He dropped out of the saddle and charged across the street. Instinct told him that no killer had fired the shot, and he saw when he rounded the corner of a store that he was right —a kid still in his early teens scrambled in retreat through the weeds of a vacant lot.

"Hey, there!" Murrell called out. "Halt!" At the harsh steel in his voice, the youngster froze with defiant fear. He trembled, but snarled back like some animal when Murrell seized his arm and shook him.

"See here, kid, what's the idea of tryin' to kill me?"

"C-Callon told me to!"

Murrell stiffened. Callon! The name held a familiar ring. Grady's eyes, invisible behind the squinting lids which gave to his wind-burnt face a dangerously sleepy expression, gleamed. He remembered: Callon's name had been mentioned in the letter he'd got from the mayor of Selby. Callon and Hart. The men whom Murrell had come north from Arizona to drive out of Selby—or kill!

He muttered to himself, "So thet's the kind of coyotes they are, sic a kid onto me to do their dirty work! Wall, Callon an' Hart, we'll see...."

He was suddenly a little tired of all this death and dangerous life which made up his profession. He was giving up after this one last job—this task of cleaning up Selby. He was storing away his gun for good. He'd lost his taste for the wild music of gunplay. Besides, the country was changing; organized law had entered, and Grady Murrell was of the old order that settled with powder and steel.

He pushed the kid forward, and grunted, "Better go back to yore nipple, son, an' wait a few years before yuh try gunnin'!"

He was turning away, acutely conscious of the ache all through him which cried for rest in a soft bed, when running footsteps jerked him alert. He spun, his tall, limber body tensing like a steel rod. A girl had darted through the weeds and was sobbing against the kid's head, which she'd drawn to her breast. A young, slender girl, body vivid with life.

MURRELL glimpsed her eyes, shiny through tears. The kid's sister, he thought. Those eyes pierced through him, pleaded with him. Manifestly she'd seen what had happened. Her voice shook.

"Oh, please, he didn't mean it! Honestly he didn't!"

"A lead slug ain't easy to swaller, an I came blamed near swallerin' one!" Murrell commented dryly.

"But—oh, sir, it's all Callon's fault!" Her cheeks flamed in anger. "I—I'd like to kill him!"

Murrell heard his dry, hard voice remark, "That's what I'm here for, so don't you bother yoreself!"

"Are you Grady Murrell?" Her eyes searched his face, seeking he didn't know what but surmised to be confirmation of some hope. "Are you the man the mayor hired from down south to clean up Selby?"

"Reckon I am ma'am—"

"I'm Lois Thompson. I teach school here. This is my brother, Jack!" She released the kid and took a step forward, to Murrell. She was small, Grady saw; her head came scarcely to the knot that held the dusty neckerchief around his throat. The trust suddenly roused in her eyes caused the Arizona man's pulse to throb with excitement—an emotion that not even danger could rouse in his cold, calculating and measured disposition. No person had ever before put the faith in him which she seemed to do.

"I'm so glad you're Murrell. I—I was afraid you'd be like those other men the mayor got up here, brutes, all of them, who didn't think of a thing but their guns and earning money on the side. Two of them hired out to Callon and Hart after the mayor had called them in!"

"An' what happened to the others?" Murrell asked.

He saw fear leap into her eyes. Her cheeks whitened and a small hand went to her throat. "They're dead!" she whispered. The hand came forward; Murrell felt it quiver against his arm. "You won't let them kill you, will you?"

"Not if I can help it!" Murrell returned, in his hard, level voice. "This is my last job. I'm quittin'! Settlin' down, mebby....Nope, I reckon I don't want to git killed right now. I aim to run them two skunks out of town, but if they won't run, I aim to kill them! I'll git them like I got others—let 'em draw first an' then smear 'em out!"

He said it simply, without boasting. He scarcely knew what he said; his voice was a far-away drone of sound. The exhilaration of the girl's interest in him was running like alcohol through his veins. He knew now why he was weary of the life he led; he wanted things that didn't go with death and killing, and foremost among them was the love of a woman.

"You don't look good to me!" the boy Jack cut in. "I reckon Callon'll polish you off jest as if you never was here!"

"You see?" Lois Thompson whispered. "Callon's his hero. He's the hero of every boy in school. They worship Callon, because he's wild and irresponsible—everything a good man shouldn't be. If something isn't done soon, every one of those boys will grow up to be like Callon!"

"I reckon Jack's got a plumb good start headed fer the owlhoot!" Murrell admitted. He addressed the boy, "So you don't think much of me?"

"Naw, I don't! I'm plumb put out that I didn't kill you! Callon'd have patted me on the back!" He ignored his sister's horrified exclamation. "I reckon you're the next who'll be goin' to boothill. There ain't nobody in the world as good with a gun as Callon!"

He spat importantly and stalked away. Murrell turned to Lois.

"You see now why we're so anxious to clean up the town!" she said, her voice quivering. "It's bad enough when the desperadoes ruin grown-ups,

but when they start in on the children —that's a thousand times worse! And a great many men here admire Callon in the same way. Some of them are in with him. Nobody knows who all of them are, so the honest men are afraid of a vigilante organization—they might include a spy, and Callon and his men would wipe them out like the murderers they are! But if Callon and Hart were removed— They've either bought off or killed every man the mayor sent for to do that job!"

"How about the sheriff?" Murrell asked.

"We have no sheriff. Nobody will run—and even if they did, Callon would see they didn't remain a lawman long! It's desperate, Mr. Murrell. If something isn't done soon, this town will become altogether outlaw, and the few decent people here will have to leave! And—my brother Jack—he'll become an outlaw—"

Grady Murrell's face was emotionless. Lois looked at him, striving to pierce the squint-slits which concealed all his thoughts and even the color of his eyes. The somber hardness of his jaw frightened her a little.

"Don't worry, ma'am!" was all he said. He was upon the point of saying more, some other word of comfort, when a horseman rode up. A red-faced, smooth-shaven man in his middle age; a fighter, Murrell divined by the tight line of his jaw.

"Grady Murrell?" Welcome to Montana, an' to Selby. I'm Mayor Thompson!" He spoke with a soft accent that branded him a Texas man. His look swept from Murrell to Lois. "What're you doin' here, cousin? Hadn't you better be back in the schoolroom?"

"Jack played hookey today, and I was looking for him. He laid for Mr. Murrell and tried to shoot him! Callon put him up to it!"

Murrell saw rage, carefully checked, in the mayor's face. "Run along now, cousin," he directed. "I'll see to Mr. Murrell."

THE GIRL left. Halfway through the weed patch she looked back over her shoulder—back at Grady's face. Even at the distance, Grady could see the flash of her eyes. And a caressing interest that roused his pulses. It was seconds before he caught the thread of Mayor Thompson's conversation.

"...the railroad wants to build through here, but the officials are afraid the roughs might wreck the station an' do other damage. So we sent down to Arizona for you. Callon an' Hart are the main desperadoes here; the rest are toadies, an' with Callon an' Hart out of the way, the town would be all right. It would be safe fer the railroad to build through. As it is, if things ain't tamed down, they aim to build their line fifty miles north, around Gold Butte.... Figger you can handle things?"

"Always have!" Murrell returned laconically.

"Yore reputation seems that-a-way, Mr. Murrell. I understand you've got plenty of outlaw notches in yore gun. Yore life's been pretty rough, I'd say!"

"Too rough! I'm settlin' down after this job; got a ranch in Arizona I'm payin' on. I figure with the money I get from this job, I'll be able to put my full time in on thet ranch. Got a mortgage big enough to choke a horse on it, but I can work that off, with any luck an' a good calf-crop. Nope, I reckon after this job, unless I have bad luck on the ranch, I'm hangin' up my guns fer good!"

"Marryin', mebby?" suggested the mayor, smiling. "We have some nice girls around Selby. Or mebby you're already harnessed?"

"Nope. Still rovin' with the wild bunch. But I aim to get married some time, mebby!" He added, under his breath, "An' mebby I've found the girl!"

"Wall, luck to you. But be mighty careful; we don't want boothill's bells ringin' before weddin' bells!"

Presently the mayor left, after directing Murrell to a hotel where there was a room reserved for him. Murrell located the sheriff's long-disused office, went in and dusted off the chair. He threw himself wearily into it. And thought....

He knew he should be planning blood and death, but instead he thought of the little, black-eyed schoolteacher, Lois Thompson. Evidently she was the mayor's cousin. She was certainly beautiful, Murrell thought. And interested in him. His heart accelerated. That ranch down home needed a mistress—He dreamed for a long time, then decided to go to the hotel and get some sleep.

He went out into the hot, dusty street that slept under the heat of mid-afternoon. Before the Northern Hotel was a knot of men who eyed him curiously, without hostility or friendliness. He was about to enter the door when a whoop halted him. Down the street came tearing a dozen boys. Evidently school was just dismissed.

The leader was Jack Thompson. Instantly Murrell thought of Lois. He divined that the girl thought the world of her brother, that Callon's influence over the lad hurt her keenly. Grady's lips tightened. He'd take steps to remove that influence. His hand dropped by instinct to the gun that hung in stripped-down holster strapped and lashed to hip and thigh. The holster that made men eye him warily when they first saw him.

Jack sighted him. And with the mob of youngsters on his heels, ran forward.

"There he is, fellers! The man who thinks he's as good as Callon!" He shook his fist and screamed out, "I tried to kill him, but I didn't! But Callon'll get him!"

They came close to Murrell, thrust out their tongues and swore at him. Then one of the boldest, lifting a rock from the dust, hurled it forward. It splintered the wooden wall close to Murrell's elbow. He stepped inside, quickly. Strange that he should be breathing hard! The taunts—and hatred—of men he was used to, but children were a different proposition. What a fiendish influence this man Callon had!

The clerk directed him to his room, and promised to take care of his horse. Murrell went wearily up the stairs, and found his room. The door was ajar. Murrell went in. Fatigue weighted him like some physical force. This, his last job, was going to be his hardest.

But what if it were not his last job—what if hard times on his ranch forced him to kill again? He didn't like to think of that. He stripped off his cartridge belt and neckerchief, from which a cloud of fine dust swirled.

IT WAS THEN that he noticed the sack lying on the table. Curiously he opened it and peered inside. The yellow of golden double-eagles leaped out to stun him.

"Like them, Murrell?"

His cougar-lithe muscles lifting him lightly, Murrell spun to face the man who had been concealed in a clothes closet. A heavy-set man, not at all villainous-appearing, but with a cruelty and hardness in his eyes that appalled Grady. A gun dangled from his fingers. Now, he stepped slowly forward.

"Like them, Murrell?" he repeated. "There's ten thousand dollars in that sack. Enough to buy that ranch of yours, lift the mortgage from it, an' keep you in comfort the rest of your days!"

"What do you know about my ranch, an' my mortgage?" Murrell asked slowly. He didn't need to ask the other's name; he knew it instinctively. Callon!

"Matter of luck. I was standin' close to the store where you an' Lois Thompson an' the mayor were gassin', an' I picked up a few words!"

He spoke in a crisp voice that held none of the desperado. He didn't look

the part at all. He might have been an ordinary businessman. But his eyes moved and wavered; they were the rolling eyes of a wolf, of a man desperately bad. Murrell read them at once and knew the man for what he was.

"Yore gun is too far away, I reckon, so I'll put mine up!" the outlaw said, holstering his weapon. He smiled a thin, humorless smile that deepened the wolf-lines about his mouth. "Now listen to me, Grady Murrell. I got a proposition for you. There's ten thousand dollars on that table. It's fer you—if you listen to us!"

"What does that mean?" Murrell asked cautiously.

He wasn't surprised; long ago he'd got over the emotion. Death, disappointment, the swift change of events—he took them as they came. And he'd expected something like this, ever since the girl had mentioned that former lawmen had been bought off.

"Jest this, Murrell: we don't have any quarrel with you, an' you've got no quarrel with us. Yo're jest doin' yore job. Yo're jest here to earn some money. Yore business is to drive us outa town or kill us. Wall, I'm raisin' the ante—I'm offerin' you ten times what Selby is givin' you. I'm offerin' it to you to get out of town an' leave us alone!"

"Afraid of me?" Murrell asked.

"Mebby, an' mebby not. We know yore reputation, an' I reckon of all the gunmen who've stood up to me, you'd come closest to outshootin' me. But I'm a businessman, Murrell, an' my gamblin' in this town makes me plenty of money. You're gummin' up things. Better take that money an' high-tail south!"

"An' my job here?

THE OUTLAW exclaimed impatiently, "I'm offerin' you ten times what Selby will give you!"

"An' if I don't take it?"

Animal fury and cruelty leaped into Callon's eyes. "There were a couple of hombres before who wouldn't listen to sense!" he remarked softly. "I reckon they ain't findin' boothill any too comfortable—too hot in the summer an' too cold in winter!"

Murrell went to the window and stared into the west, where the Rockies jutted like purple sawteeth above the prairie horizon. The weariness of his body and soul tugged him down. Ten thousand dollars—for riding away! No gunfight, no looking into the face of death, no unpleasantness. Just ten thousand dollars—enough to pay for his ranch, to lift the mortgage, to build up a herd sufficiently large to take care of him the rest of his life.

He could, in truth, hang up his guns for good. No more that last, sickening instant when he drew, to kill or be killed—the one moment in all this bloody business which he hated. The moment he put off as long as he could, until his opponent forced his hand. No more of that....

But there was Lois. The first woman in whom he'd ever been interested. He was opening his mouth to refuse the desperado's offer when Callon, as if reading his thoughts, said, "An' while I'm thinkin' about it, Murrell, don't let thet little schoolteacher keep you here. Lois Thompson is goin' to marry Colonel James, the owner of the James spread. He's worth millions. If she give you any encouragement today, jest remember she's marryin' him fer his money...."

Murrell seemed suddenly dead. He numbed all over, to the sensation of drunkenness. To despair. He heard himself laugh queerly. He'd heard of Colonel James and the James spread. And he'd imagined Lois Thompson as the mistress of his little two-bit spread in Arizona!

Ten thousand dollars, in golden double-eagles—

"All right!" he heard his voice grit out, in far-away tones, "I'm takin' the gold an goin'!"

"An' right now!" Callon persisted.

"Right now! Have my hawss brought around!"

He found himself out in the street, in the dusk. He must have walked down the stairs, but he hadn't felt them under his boots. Out here reality assailed him. His horse appeared, and a man at whom Callon waved.

"This is my pard, Hart."

Murrell acknowledged the man's curt "Howdy," but without much realizing it. He gave Selby a last look. There were people on the streets, watching him curiously. Suddenly it came to him that they knew what was happening! Contempt was in their faces, in their eyes.

But ten thousand dollars was a lot of money...

"Yaa! Scairt out! What'd I tell you?"

It was the boy Jack. Murrell twisted in the saddle and looked into the kid's triumphant—and jeering—face. There were other boys behind him, who now shouted and grimaced.

"Scairt out! I told yuh Callon was too good for you law-an'-order men!" Jack yelped.

Grady's mind moved slowly. Lois loved Jack—it hurt her to think that he patterned his life after the lawless—she'd pinned her faith in the gunman from Arizona. And now the gunman was leaving. Jack would grow up to be an outlaw—unless Callon was blotted out of the picture.

Murrell took a deep breath. It didn't matter much, in the long run, that Lois would never be the mistress of his Arizona ranch. What mattered was that the country changed, that the old order which Callon and Murrell personified, was vanishing. In the new order young gunmen, as Jack would be, would most certainly be blotted out of the picture quickly. And Lois loved Jack...

Grady Murrell spun his horse by short rein. He flung the bag of money into the dust before the hoofs of Callon's mount.

"Listen, Callon an' Hart!" he ordered in his cold, deadly voice. "I'm the special marshal of Selby, an' I'm warnin' you two to be outa town by twelve o'clock. Tonight! Pack an' get!"

"So you changed yore mind, eh?" Hart questioned. Some throat ailment diminished his voice to a hoarse whisper. But a deadly whisper!

"You two heard me! Outa town by twelve o'clock! If you're still here, I'm usin' lead force! I'll wait up in my room, an' on the stroke of twelve I start out lookin' for you!"

Callon dismounted and picked up the bag. He didn't raise his eyes or his voice, but his words were clean-cut and sharp as a pistol shot.

"At twelve o'clock, Murrell, Hart an' I will be in the *Northern* bar there down the street! An' we'll be waitin' for you!"

MURRELL watched the hands of the clock, dimly illumined by the light of a smoky kerosene lamp, creep towards the twelve mark. With twenty minutes to go, he began to inspect his gun. At ten minutes to midnight, he'd made sure that his weapon would not fail him; he got slowly to his feet, strapped the holster about his hips, and thrust the dully-gleaming .45 into it. He tried his hand a couple of times, and was satisfied with his lightning draw.

Until this moment, as was his way, he'd been icy cold and emotionless. But now, with the ivory butt cuddled in his palm and the hands of the clock meeting towards midnight, he felt the thrill of the killer—a sensation he hadn't experienced in years. His breath shortened; his heart tumbled wildly. But he did not permit it to grip him; outwardly nothing appeared—this man with the half-closed eyes was a hard and ruthless statue of granite without feeling of any sort beneath. Which was the reputation by which the lawless

knew him, and a reputation he'd uphold within the next few minutes.

He went downstairs and into the moonlit night. There was a barrel of water and a dipper near the door; he drank deeply but not too deeply to cool the fire that had roused in him. He went along the street. Flame jumped through his veins. And then he calmed himself with the realization that this was his job—this killing outlaws after he'd warned them. There must be none of the killer-lust within him. He shot to uphold law and order.

After that, he strode along as unconcernedly as a man going to his daily work.

But the steps that followed weren't so unconcerned; they pattered nervously along the board walk and came to a halt beside Grady. Lois! The moonlight touched her cheeks and hair, and the slender length of her body. Something within Murrell shook at her beauty—and the fact that she could never be his!

"Oh, Murrell, I—I heard about you! Callon's been bragging. Are you going down to the *Northern* and shoot it out with him?"

"That's what I contracted to do!" Murrell said harshly.

"P-please, Murrell, be careful! Callon is a killer!"

"So am I!" Grady reminded her.

Murrell, I—I think it was wonderful of you to refuse that bribe—"

Grady said nothing. He couldn't. Some force tugged at his throat, and muted him. So he walked on, ignoring her and never looking back, and presently her footsteps followed him no more. Then Murrell ventured to glance back; sight of the empty, moonlit street made him feel queer inside.

He went swiftly to the *Northern,* and with his boot crashed open the swinging doors. He was unnecessarily violent, for the killer-rage had roused again, and he wanted to diminish it with a show of physical force before the final gun-flame showdown.

Inside the bar, the place was hushed and strained; the card tables were empty, with most of the men gathered at the bar. Grady saw why, and his lips were touched by a grim grin—the way to a swift retreat was open from the bar. Behind the mahogany top the keeper was swabbing glasses nervously. His eyes jerked shiftily when Murrell entered. Obviously, he didn't want to appear nervous, and began to hum a tune which lifted sharply above the subdued hum of half-whispering men.

"The grass of old Montannay—
Is green as green as can—"

The words froze in his throat when Murrell, stepping into a place magically cleared for him at the bar, ordered a drink.

"Yessir, yessir, Mr. Murrell! Comin' up!"

Grady turned to face the room. He saw nothing of Callon the mild, or the whispering Hart. But the eyes of many men were hostile, and their faces contorted with hatred. Murrell swept them indifferently; he knew the breed, and knew that once he had killed Callon and Hart these men would be as faithful to his law and order as they had been to the outlaws' disorder and crookedness.

"Any of you hombres seen Callon an' Hart?" he inquired of them at large. "I'm special peace officer here an' I give them two hombres until twelve to pack outa town. It's twelve now!"

When no man vouchsafed an answer, he turned to the barkeep and repeated the question. That individual seemd almost in a faint, but mustered enough energy to pipe, "Nosir, nosir, ain't seen 'em!"

"I reckon mebby they've left town, then?" Murrell pursued.

"I—I couldn't rightly say—"

The man's lips froze; his eyes stared with peculiar intentness and affright past Grady's head. And simultaneously the men at the bar began edging away. Murrell laughed. He was cold as ice;

with the killer-lust gone; filled only with his desire to have a disagreeabe job over with.

He knew what was happening—Callon and Hart, hidden up to this point in a back room, were advancing on him from behind.

"Yore licker is good, barkeep. Seein' as how I'm the special peace officer around here, I reckon I rate a drink free, eh?"

He leaned over, the bar top hard against his stomach, and poked the keeper in the chest. The man leaped as if shot.

"Nervous, barkeep? Take my advice an' sleep more! Sleep'll settle the nerves like nothin' else!"

"A good, long sleep is goin' to settle yore nerves for good!" Callon's soft voice purred behind him.

MURRELL spun, in exaggerated surprise.

"Callon, I didn't figure to see you here!" he ejaculated, "I figgered you an' Hart would be outa town by now!"

"Jolly old cuss, ain't you?" Hart whispered. He was a little behind Callon, and to one side. His eyes were harsh, as compared with the bland but dangerous gleam in his leader's coyote look.

"Well, well!" Grady permitted a thin, hard smile to ripple along his lips, "I don't exactly aim to spread sweetness an' light, but I aim to git on the best I can!" Then suddenly he made his voice jerk like the lash of a blacksnake, "I thought I told you an' Callon to be outa town by twelve!"

"An' I said," Callon reminded him softly, "that I'd be here at twelve!"

Murrell was acting now. Acting as he'd acted before, a prelude to gunsmoke and lead. He said, "You boys are plumb tough about it, ain't you? I jest ask you peaceable to leave town, an' now you git nasty!"

"Mebby we'd better jest turn about, an' invite you to leave town!" Callon suggested.

"Ain't you boys jest uppity mavericks!" Murrell jeered, "You can't be serious, can't you? Don't yuh remember it was me ordered you to leave town?"

He pushed himself away from the bar with his elbows. He took three apparently aimless steps to the left, placing distance between himself and the two men. A sinister movement; the onlookers recognized it, scattered, and the barkeep ducked.

"So you boys are intent on stayin'?" Murrell said.

Callon stiffened, an imperceptible tensing of muscles that presaged explosive action. His fingers twitched. It wouldn't be long now. In a second Callon would draw.

Then it occurred to the Arizona man that he might himself be killed. It had always been thus—no thought of self until this last moment of action. And then a momentary dread of death, a brief moment when vision of himself lying silent on the floor tormented him. Visions and thoughts that vanished in a cool, merciless rage which found climax in the throb of guns.

Never once taking his eyes from the two, his fingers fumbled for tobacco and cigarette papers. He rolled a white cylinder expertly, ran his tongue along the edge, and with his left hand groped for a match. In his right he held the cigarette, steadied chest-high above the butt of his gun. Failing to find a match, he withdrew his fingers and held them out.

"I'm needin' a match. Got one, Callon?"

The man snarled out, his soft voice for once breaking, "I wouldn't give you anythin', Grady Murrell! Hell, what we standin' here for? You ordered us out of town. What you aim to do about it?"

"Nothin'!" Murrell returned. "Jest stand here an' wait fer a match—until you crack an' go for your gun! Then I'll kill yuh!"

Callon seemed to freeze, but his fin-

gers continued to twitch with a slow, water-rippling motion. Behind him, Hart tensed.

"Better wait until yore boss draws!" Murrell jeered.

"Damn you, Murrell, I'll kill you!" Callon screamed, breaking suddenly.

His hand dropped. Came up, flaming. Murrell deliberately waited the fraction of a second which in the coroner's verdict would give him the judgment of self-defense. Then his hand dipped. The cigaret spilled to the floor, while the hand that held it straightened out to balance the other hand that drew a gun with the speed of light.

Murrell felt the cold grip against his palm, felt the hard metal of the fanning hammer under the ball of his thumb. He heard the boom of Callon's weapon. And the hiss of lead close by him. Then his thumb lifted from the drawn-back hammer and his gun thundered with the voice of doom.

Not once. Three times, the shots blending into one continuous roar. Callon reeled and shook; his knees wavered, but with a tremendous effort he held himself erect. His eyes gleamed to the pale yellow of some desperate animal. Suddenly his face contorted; one hand went up to clutch his throat, and he toppled forward. But not dead yet; he writhed and kicked, and twisted over on his back.

Murrell turned his attention to Hart. The whispering man had withheld his fire momentarily, but now he opened up. He used both hands to fan his weap- sweeping back the hammer. And he was on, left fingers on the grip, right palm appallingly fast. Then Murrell unleashed his own weapon and fanned until the gun was empty.

Hart took a step forward. He seemed to turn to stone. His finger froze on the trigger; his mouth dropped open in a ghastly expression of surprise. His eyes wavered, then focused in death. He crumpled to his knees. His gun clattered with a steely sound along the floor. For an instant he held himself upright on hands and knees, then he flattened out, chin against the floor. A wave of red seethed out from under him.

"An' that's another job!" Murrell exulted. But even in victory his caution didn't desert him. He turned back to Callon. Just in time. The man, in the last moment before death, had raised his gun. Now it exploded. White flame seemed to tear through Murrell. He reeled. He thumbed his gun, but the hammer smashed on empty cylinders.

But another shot wasn't necessary. Callon's shot had been his death-act; he settled back and his eyes focused into the same death-stare as his partner's.

Murrell turned around. He was conscious of blood in his throat, of blood dripping from his chin. The room began to spin about him and blacken. He took a step forward. He heard himself gurgle out, "That's the end—" and then the darkening floor leaped up to meet him.

HE AWOKE to a white bed, and a nurse bending over him. Also,

there was an excited mumble he didn't place until he turned on his side and saw a bunch of kids, staring at him with awed looks. It was the bunch that had jeered him. There was wholesome, genuine admiration in their eyes.

Jack Thompson stepped forward. He held a flower, which he shoved at Murrell. His eyes were big and round.

"Gee, Mr. Murrell you're good! A lot better than Callon! I'll bet all you men who uphold the law are better than Callon was! I'm goin' to be a sheriff when I grow up! Hey, fellows!" he called to his friends, "We're all goin' to be sheriffs when we grow up, ain't we?" They chorused assent.

"And now you'd better go!" The nurse said, and forced them out. Then, "Another visitor," she announced, and left herself.

It was Lois. She came to Grady's side at once, and her look stirred him.

"The boys are all changed!" she said. "You are Jack's hero now! Those boys are saved! They'll admire the law now—not the outlaw!"

"I—I reckon that's good!" Murrell stammered, at a loss for words. He didn't particularly want to be thanked. He was being paid to do his work.

"Grady, listen!" Lois whispered, coming very close, "you were delirious . . . you said something about Colonel James—"

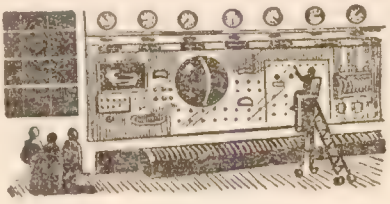
"Callon told me you were going to marry him!"

"That's another of Callon's lies! I'm not going to marry him! He's nice to me, but I'm not going to marry him!"

Murrell smiled. Suddenly everything was very peaceful, and he was comfortable. No need to tell her what Callon's lie had almost done. That was in the past. For the present—

He heard the sound of the boys playing out in the street. He looked at Lois, and his grin widened. They'd make a nice lot of lawmen—a good bunch to uphold law and order when they grew to be men!

★



Adventures in Space and Time

★ *Robert Randall,* a name you'll remember, leads off the issue with a novelet you won't forget—

NO FUTURE IN THIS.

★ *Robert Abernathy* is author of the story from which Emsh painted the cover — ONE OF THEM?

★ Plus other stories, and our regular features and readers' departments

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Special Feature

THE HAUNTED STAGECOACH STATION

by Mat Rand

NEAR THE Chavez Hills, about thirty miles south-west of Winslow, Arizona, is what remains of an old stagecoach station. Back in the 1800's when the stages were running through the area, a family settled down for the night in the station. It was their last night on earth: The entire family was slain by Apache Indians that same night.

The station was soon abandoned, and from then on was used only by an occassional wandering cowboy needing a place to sleep overnight. They usually left rather hurriedly before morning, nearly scared out of their wits by the sounds they heard. There was the sound of horse's hoofs and the creaking of old coach springs. This would be followed by a short silence, then someone outside would call, "Hello in there!"

The cowboy, upon opening the door, would see no sign of a stagecoach or passengers. While looking around outside, he would suddenly find the silence broken again by the sounds of a struggle inside the station. The screams of women and children would be mingled with the cursing of struggling men, and the growling of dogs. Eventually all sounds would cease, making the ensuing silence even more frightening. Naturally, the station was empty.

During the late 1880's, a cowboy who apparently did not believe in ghosts, agreed to spend a night in the abandoned station. In order that he would be unable to leave during the night, he was chained and padlocked to the bed, and the key was taken away. When he was released the next morning he admitted to having spent a terrifying night.

He declared fervently, "I would have given ten years of my life if I could have released myself and gotten out of there." He reported that the complete incident kept repeating itself most of the night, and the sounds had been horrible. This cowboy had actually worn a track on the floor from pacing up and down as far as the chain would allow.

It is reported that in 1921, when only the ruins of the stage station were still standing, a party of tourists bedded down for the night within earshot of the ruins. They heard the same sounds, and found them so frightening they packed up and left.

Whether or not one believes in ghosts, it seems the ghosts of the massacred family still haunted the station every night—reenacting the entire event.

★

It was an endurance contest, out in the desert — and somehow, Beeson had to be convinced that his pursuer had plenty of water...

SIDEWINDER SPRINGS

by FLOYD BEAVER

THE DESERT dawn flamed in the east, lighting the drawn and dusty faces of a trail-worn posse. Near-empty canteens sloshed and slapped on the saddles and the dust of many miles lay thick and gray on both animals and men. Loosened stones clattered down the slopes as the tired horses slipped and stumbled. Sheriff Bates held up his hand, signalling another rest stop.

"This is where we turn back," the sheriff said. "We ain't gonna find Beeson now, anyway; he's crost the border, or is in hell by this time."

Most of the tired riders nodded ready assent, but Jim Peters, gaunt and grim-faced in the dawn light, spurred to the sheriff's side. "We kin still git him, Sheriff," he said.

"We bin trying now for three days," the sheriff said. "Our water's gone; best we git back to town."

"Beeson's water's gone, too," Peters persisted. "When we skeered him away from Gila Hole, he didn't have time to fill any canteens. He needs water worse'n we do, an' he's only got one place to git it. Ain't no other hole in reach."

"Sidewinder Springs," the sheriff agreed. "But Beeson was headed south; Sidewinder's to the east."

"Beeson knows the desert," Peters said. "He'll double 'round Lonesome mountain and come back to Sidewinder."

"Wish I could see it your way, Jim," the sheriff said. "But, for my money, Beeson's still headed south and trying to make the border."

Peters swallowed dry, feeling the thirst claw at his throat. "Reckon you ain't got any objections if I go by myself?"

"You?" the sheriff said. "You're crazy, Jim; Beeson's the best gun in the territory. You wouldn't stand a chance."

"That's the way she is, Sheriff," Peters said. "Seein' as how it was my brother Beeson shot in the back, reckon it's rightly my fight anyhow."

"Look, Jim," the sheriff said. "I know how you feel, but you ain't helping anybody by getting yourself killed."

"I ain't aiming to git myself killed," Peters said. "I figure to get to Sidewinder first. There's some rocks there. I'll hide and I figure Beeson will come to me; I figure he'll be right thirsty."

The sheriff met Peters' eyes for a long moment. "I wouldn't let you go, Jim, if I thought Beeson was headed for Sidewinder. If it'll make you feel any better, go on."

"See you later," Peters said as he reined his horse and loped off to the east. He wanted to cover as much ground as possible before the sun got high, but his horse was too far gone to make much speed.

SLOWLY, inexorably, the sun rose over the eastern mountains and the valley lay flat and inert, helpless in the bludgeoning, brutal heat that drove even the snakes and lizards of the desert to cover. Peters swayed in his saddle, clinging desperately to the horn as the horizon appeared and disappeared through black curtains of nausea.

Again and again, his brother's face took form in Peters' tortured brain, only to disappear in a blast of gunfire and be replaced by that of renegade gunslinger Alex Beeson. "I'll get him for you, Bill," Peters croaked. "I'll get the dry-gulching snake for you if it's the last thing I do."

About five miles from Sidewinder, Peters dismounted and led his winded horse to the top of a little knoll. Shading his eyes against the glare, he scanned the eastern horizon. Suddenly, he tensed. There around the eastern base of Lonesome mountain, was dust. Not much, just enough to catch the morning sun and stand white and shining in the still air. A horseman was slipping and sliding down the steep alkali slopes.

Peters heaved himself into his saddle and kicked his horse into a shambling run. Now the vision of his brother was with him constantly, goading him on, smiling and reminiscing, filling him with a blinding hunger for vengeance. Vengeance on Beeson.

Peters lashed his horse savagely. He cursed and screamed as he saw the distant dust suddenly increase, knowing that Beeson had seen him. He gritted his teeth against nausea and fought to close his ears to the agonizing wheezing of his horse.

The sun was high now. It beat through Peters' dusk-caked hat and matted hair, bludgeoning his reeling brain until nothing was known but that distant dust, rising and falling, spinning and turning, in a great void of whites and ochres and dull reds. Just that dust. That dust and his Brother's gently smiling face.

Beeson broke into the clear then, little more than a mile away and closing Sidewinder fast. His big bay with stockinged front feet was clearly visible and for the first time, Peters was sure the rider was in fact Beeson. And he was equally sure that Beeson would reach the springs first.

Peters pulled out his old black-handled Colt and spurred his unfeeling horse. Even had he not been blinded by his desire for vengeance, there was no turning back. Without water, he would never make it back to town; he had made his bet.

Beeson was so close now that Peters could see his horse falter. It stumbled and Beeson half-fell from his saddle as he viciously pulled it up for one floundering moment before it collapsed all in a heap and Beeson rolled clear on the desert floor.

Exultantly, Peters yelled through his bleeding lips, his teeth bared in an animal-like grimace, as he watched Beeson struggle to his feet and break into a lurching run for the springs.

The rocks guarding the water were close now, the shimmering heat waves wriggling over them, their shadows lying hard and black at their bases. "Just a little bit more, horse," Peters coaxed. And the horse stumbled on. Another fifty yards, another twenty-five, another ten. Then, all at once, it crumpled in mid-stride and crashed to the ground.

Peters was ready and rolled clear, jumping to his feet and staggering for

the shelter of the rocks. Beeson stopped and took deliberate aim. The range was too great for accurate hand gun fire, but the sheriff's warning had not been an idle one.

THE SLUGS exploded sand in Peters' face, and glanced off the rocks in screaming ricochets. Peters dived behind the first rock and lay face down in the scalding sand. His breath came in tearing gasps and violent flashes of light burst inside his eyes.

Painfully, Peters pulled himself up and looked over the rock, just in time to see Beeson throw himself behind a hummock of sand on the opposite side of the spring.

"That you, Beeson?" Peters croaked.

"It's me, Peters; come and get me."

"It's all over, Beeson. Come out with your hands up."

"Go to hell, Peters."

"If I don't get you, the sun will," Peters said.

"That sun ain't takin' sides," Beeson said. "I'm younger and tougher'n you. Ain't nothing says it won't get you first."

Peters dropped his head on his arms, knowing Beeson was right, knowing that he had failed. It took all his will now to fight back that blackness of fainting in which his brother's smiling face floated. "Water," the face seemed to say. "Big canteens of water. Cool. Cool and wet."

Desperately, Peters shook himself back to consciousness and peered over the rock. Beeson was running for the springs. Peters aimed and fired. Sand exploded in front of Beeson. He threw up his arms to protect his face and lunged behind another sand hummock, some fifteen yards closer to the springs than he had been before.

"Almost out, wasn't you, Peters?" Beeson croaked. "You just go ahead and rest, old man. I can wait."

After the firing, the desert was still. There was only the soft soughing of the wind through the rocks and the occasional scratching of a frightened lizard. Peters shifted his weight on the searing sand and waited, his eyes burning, his brain straining to remain clear, his tongue a swollen, abrasive thing in his throat.

Peters felt himself slipping back into delirium again, and again his brother's face was before him, this time years ago when they were both boys. His brother was carrying a canteen, huge in his boy's hand. He was laughing. And Peters remembered the old family joke that began when their father sent them out to fill a canteen from a desert mirage.

Peters groaned and clenched his fists in the sand, feeling it close like water around his fingers, seeing flakes of mica and other minerals glitter like sunlight on a lake. Suddenly he tensed. An expression of savage cunning lighted his eyes. He twisted and looked over his shoulder to where his horse lay dead in the sand, with the saddle canteen lying where it had fallen.

Silently, carefully, hidden from Beeson by the rock behind which he had been sheltering, Peters crawled back and got the canteen. He dragged it back to the rock and hunched over it in the sand. After a few minutes he called: "Beeson!"

"Yeah."

"Stil think you can out-wait me?"

"You know I can, Peters. Ain't no use talking about it."

"You might've done it all right," Peters said. "That is, if I hadn't crawled back to my horse and got a canteen of water. I can stay here now till this time tomorrow. Reckon you can wait that long, Beeson?"

"You're lying," Beeson croaked.

"Like to see some water, Beeson?" Peters got to his knees and held the canteen high in the air.

"IT'S EMPTY," Beeson screamed. He, too, stood on his knees and Peters could see his cruelly-burned face

twisted in an agony of thirst and frustration and dying hope. If Peters had water, Beeson was through. And Beeson knew it.

Peters thumped the canteen against the rock. "That sound empty?" he called.

"You're lying! It's empty!" Beeson screamed, hysteria rising high in his voice.

"No it's not, Beeson. Look." Peters tipped the canteen and a glistening stream poured from the canteen. "Still think you can out-wait me?" Peters called.

Beeson scrambled to his feet, completely unnerved. His face twisted with pain and hate, he emptied his gun at Peters. Peters ducked and the slugs screamed and whined off the rocks, showering him with dust and rock chips.

Beeson remained standing, his smoking gun drooping, his eyes glassy and fixed on Peters' canteen. He seemed in a trance.

Peters got to his feet and walked straight toward Beeson, his gun ready, his canteen dragging behind him. "Drop your gun," Peters ordered. Then, as the fastest gun in the territory thudded into the sand, Peters tossed his canteen at Beeson's feet.

"I'd of had you, if you hadn't got that water," Beeson snarled with hate burning in his eyes. He snatched up the canteen and tilted its neck between his cracked and swollen lips. As though suddenly frozen, he stood stock still, his eyes turning wild and crazed, his muscles locked.

"What's the matter, Beeson?" Peters grinned with stiff lips. "Thought you was thirsty."

Beeson, gagging and choking, dropped the canteen and stared dumbly at the sand that poured from its neck. "Sand," he croaked. "You didn't have water; it was sand you poured out."

Peters pulled the crown thong from his hat and whipped a lashing about Beeson's unprotesting wrists before shoving him toward the springs.

Before he could drink himself, black delirium swept over him momentarily and his brother's face again took form. Peters grinned. "Tell Paw I finally got that canteen full of mirage for him," Peters said. Then he drank.

★

A Haunting Novel of the Hunted!

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FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

Special Feature

TURN ABOUT

by Zachary Strong

NEARLY everyone interested in the history of the West has heard about Judge Roy Bean—the self-styled law West of the Pecos. Equally known is his infatuation for the actress, Lily Langtry, whose name he gave to the Texas town where he "practised" law. The admiration Roy Bean held for this famous actress, whom he had never even met, brought sudden death to several men who were tactless enough to make certain remarks about her—remarks which Roy Bean considered disrespectful.

This same admiration of his had other effects, one of which occurred the day a young cowpuncher was brought into Judge Bean's court on the charge of horse-stealing. The trial was very short, as two witnesses testified to having seen the young puncher steal the horse. Range law being what it was in those days, the prisoner could expect nothing better than a very prompt hanging.

As was Judge Bean's custom, he adjourned court briefly before passing sentence. This adjournment consisted of nothing more than His Honor stepping behind the liquor bar, where he sold drinks to everyone—including the accused. Everyone bought a drink during such an adjournment, because failure to do so meant a fine for contempt of court.

The horse-stealing prisoner, while drinking what promised to be his last drink, chanced to see the Judge's framed picture of the actress. "Ain't that Miss Lily Langtry?" the puncher asked. "I ain't seen her since the last time I was back East."

Judge Bean stared at the young man, a look of surprise and interest spreading over his features. "You say you really seen her?" he asked eagerly.

"I shore did. She was wonderful; never before have I seen a lady as fine as beautiful as she was." The puncher continued to extol the beauty of Lily Langtry.

The usual short recess was extended for nearly an hour, as the Judge plied the young man with questions. Miss Langtry's stage performances and her beauty were the sole topic of conversation between the two.

When the court was finally called to order again, Judge Roy Bean wasted no time before passing sentence: "I'm sick and tired of having innocent men brought in here. Since no responsible persons saw this boy steal that horse, I'm fining the men who brought him in, ten dollars apiece for contempt of court. Prisoner discharged!"

★

They wouldn't recognize the Abilene Kid for Ab Seldon, but they'd know a killer when they saw one. And the Kid knew he'd be hated...

TICKETS TO BOOTHILL

by G. A. CASSADO

NO ONE SPOKE to the tall, gaunt rider on the long-legged dun mare as man and horse came slowly along the muddy, rutted main street of Mesita. The Abilene Kid smiled bitterly. He knew what invoked the fear, the distrust and contempt on the faces of men when they looked at him. He knew he wore the brand of killer in his hard, expressionless gray eyes, in the relentless, immobile lines around his thin, gashed lips.

A little while ago, when he had ridden through Sun Pass and looked down on Signal Valley, green and jewel-like under the glory of a great, misty rainbow, he had felt a thrill of homecoming. It came to him then that perhaps this, his home range, could be a haven for him where he could settle down and forget about those lonely, blood-drenched years on the border trails where the Abilene Kid and his gun, for sale to the highest bidder, had carved for themselves a sinister fame.

But then he looked down at his tied gun, a reminder of his mission here. And he realized that there could never be any peace for him in Signal Valley if he persisted in going through with the job ahead. And go through with it he must, or die.

Now Abilene's lips curled in sardonic self-ridicule. No matter what he did or didn't do, he couldn't live down his past. He'd been a fool to think, even for a moment, that because a certain night of gun-flame and death at San Carlos had changed him so that his own mother wouldn't have recognized him, he could fool the men of Signal Valley—live among them as one of their own kind.

In a way, he could fool them. No one

would recognize the white-haired Abilene Kid, with the puckered scars which had changed the modeling of his lean face, and the useless, crippled left hand. They wouldn't know he was the same Ab Seldon who had ridden out of this valley eight years ago just two jumps ahead of a law posse. A wild young kid who'd gotten drunk and killed a cheating, tinhorn gambler in a saloon brawl.

No, they wouldn't know him; but they'd know he was a killer, and they'd hate him. Even if he didn't go through with the gun-job that waited for him here in Mesita.

He'd gone a long way since he had left Signal Valley. Until three years ago he'd been Ab Seldon, an outlaw with a bounty price on his head. At San Carlos, Seldon had disappeared, so far as the world was concerned, and the Abilene Kid was born in his stead. A man with a new face and a new reputation. The law couldn't touch the Abilene Kid. A hired gunman, he always drew last and triggered first.

He'd killed a lot of men. Most of them had deserved killing, but there were times when Abilene had sent good men to Boothill—wild youngsters who sought glory by facing his guns, earnest lawmen who pursued him with the zeal of crusaders.

Sometimes the voices and the faces of those dead men came stealing into his dreams. But folks didn't know that; they called him inhuman, a born killer. They would have laughed if anyone told them the Abilene Kid was tired of handing out one-way tickets to Boothill.

ABILENE shrugged his broad shoulders resignedly as he racked his bronc in front of the *Paradise Saloon.* He told himself he didn't give a damn; he'd known all along that he couldn't lay aside his gun. He told himself he'd go crazy, living the tame kind of life these ranchers and cowpokes lived.

The Abilene Kid told himself that, but just before he batted through the wing doors of the *Paradise,* he stared down the street at a smiling rancher who was helping his slim, clear-eyed wife on to the high seat of a buckboard. Cradled in the woman's arms was a tiny, curly-headed button, laughing up at his mother.

That childish laughter seemed to do something to the Abilene Kid. If a passerby had looked at his eyes now, he would have seen that they weren't hard, expressionless. They were soft, almost wistful.

A spasm of purely physical pain flashed across Abilene's face and he turned away abruptly, strode into the smoke-dim interior of the *Paradise.* His eyes were alert, stone-hard now, his mouth grim. He couldn't step out of his role of killer yet. For he must get relief from the dull ache along his spine, where lead from a lawman's gun had lodged and was poisoning his system, slowly killing him. There was a man in Mesita who would pay him for a gun job he wanted done, pay him enough so that Abilene could go to a specialist in Chicago and have that crippling slug cut out of his back.

It had to be done, the Kid knew, remembering the warning of a medico in Mesa City. "I'll give you approximately six months to live if that irritation isn't removed within the next few weeks," the doctor had told him a month ago. "Once the infection becomes widespread, it means your finish."

The office was blue with cigar smoke. Through that pungent haze, the Abilene Kid stared coldly at Rance Bardell, proprietor of the *Paradise.* He didn't like Bardell's shifty, slitted eyes. He didn't like the contemptuous, sneering smile that wreathed the man's big face whenever he spoke of the nesters and small ranchers of Signal Valley. The look of the man and the way he wore his guns told Abilene that Rance Bardell was a killer, the kind who carved notches on his sixes and whose dreams were never troubled

by the ghosts of the men his guns had sent to Boothill.

"You sent for me," Abilene said imperturbably.

Bardell's cruel lips spread in a grin. "Three years ago, an outlaw, Ab Seldon, pulled a job down in San Carlos. Folks say he died that night, but I know different. A Mex friend of mine, Juan Flores, nursed Seldon back to life. Seldon became the Abilene Kid. Me, I been wantin' you on my payroll ever since that San Carlos job, Kid. Six notches for yore gun—all in ten minutes of shootin'. Cripes! That was—"

"Exactly what d'you want done, Bardell?" The Abilene Kid's voice was like a breeze off a snow-field, and his pale eyes flamed with greenish lights. It disturbed him that Bardell knew his real identity; and he wasn't proud of the San Carlos affair. He wanted to forget the man who had gone down before his guns that night. And as always, cold hate seethed within him as he thought of the trusted partner who had deserted him, left him to face the law guns alone.

RANCE BARDELL'S eyes narrowed, and the dark blood mounted to his face at Abilene's rebuff. He studied the gunman's still face, noted the way he wore his single, thonged sixshooter. Then he relaxed.

"I know you don't hire out to kill decent men, Kid," he began. "You can rest easy that the two hombres I want out of the way are the kind that deserve to die. One of them is Ripley Posson, a tinhorn gambler and gunman who owns the *Oro Grande Saloon* here in town. He's tryin' to run me outa business, figgerin' there's room for only one saloon in Mesita—his.

"Him and his brother, Jack, have already gunned two of my house gamblers. I'm next in line. But I wouldn't have a chance against Ripley Posson. He's too fast on the draw."

Abilene's face remained immobile. "And the other man you want annihilated, is it this Jack Posson?" he drawled.

Bardell shook his head. "No. He's a weaklin'. He won't go on fightin' me after his gunhawk brother is dead."

Bardell pinched his cigar between thumb and fingers, studied it with veiled eyes. "I own a ranch here. One of my neighbors is givin' me trouble. Since I killed a friend of his in a fair fight, he's been tryin' to frame me. Keeps shootin' off his mouth, accusin' me and my riders of the rustlin' that goes on here in the valley.

"He's got influence here. I want him shut up for good before he gets some of his hothead friends to form a vigilance committee and come callin' for me with a lynch-noose."

The Abilene Kid eyed Rance Bardell somberly as the man held a match to his cold cigar. Abilene didn't like the job ahead. He was tired of the sound of dying voices in his ears, the sight of pain-contorted faces flitting through his dreams. Rance Bardell's figure blurred suddenly before him, cleared. Abilene's face remained wooden, not hinting at the shaky, sick feeling inside him. It was the old, familiar pain again. The Kid's eyes hardened. Now was no time to be squeamish. What the hell difference would two more ghosts make anyhow—?"

"I'll take the job," he told Bardell. "It'll cost you three thousand bucks—in advance."

Bardell snorted incredulously. "Yo're a robber, man!" he snapped. "I'll get somebody else—"

"One of yore own men?" Abilene said smoothly. "What if he's caught and yore name is dragged into the mess? Me, I never bungle a job, and I never get caught."

Bardell scowled. Resentment smoldered in his eyes. But Abilene had a feeling that the man wasn't particularly displeased. "Okay, Kid," he said quickly. Too quickly. The Abilene Kid felt a warning stir inside his brain.

Bardwell was not to be trusted, he told himself.

"This hombre's name is Doc Mackay. He—"

Abilene didn't hear the rest of what Bardell was saying. At mention of that name he had gone white, tense. Doc Mackay—Bardell wanted him to kill Doc Mackay, the man who had been Tumbleweed Smith, Abilene's partner. The man who'd deserted him, run out on him that bloody night at San Carlos. The Abilene Kid knew Doc Mackay was Tumbleweed Smith, because he'd found out that his ex-partner had shown briefly in the border towns. He had turned straight, was back at his old profession of doctoring, and he was going by the name of Mackay.

Abilene almost laughed aloud. Killing the medico would be a pleasure! In a single, lithe movement, he leaned forward, scooped up the bank notes that Bardell had placed on the desk.

"Where will I find Mackay?" he said quickly, eagerness sharpening his voice.

Bardell frowned. "Hold on, Kid," he rasped. "I want Ripley Posson out of the way first. Mackay rode over to Sagetown on business today. He won't be at his ranch until tonight. Ripley Posson will be riding into Mesita along about sundown, as usual. Get him, then go after Mackay."

DURING the afternoon, sullen, massed clouds gathered for a downpour. Through a rift in those clouds, a setting sun was sending shafts of crimson light over the prairie like trailing bloody fingers when the Abilene Kid faced Ripley Posson in front of the Oro Grande Saloon.

The Kid felt no qualm of misgiving, no regret as lead from his bucking gun brought Posson down. The evil-eyed, gun-swift gambler was of a breed he knew well. The same treacherous, ruthless killer-breed as Rance Bardell. Abilene watched the man pitch to the boardwalk, then turned to go.

"Dirty killer!"

The Kid turned inscrutable eyes on the man who darted out of the Oro Grande to run to Posson's huddled figure. Abilene saw another Ripley Posson, and knew that this was the dead gambler's brother, Jack.

He waited, but Jack Posson made no move for his gun. Fear matched the hate flaring in his beady eyes. Abilene moved away as onlookers closed in to stare at death.

He went to the livery and got his dun mare. Lightning split the cloud-black dusk and thunder muttered, grew into an earth-shaking cannonading as he rode out of town, followed Angel Creek northward. Abilene stared ahead, to where low, crumpled hills melted into the murky sky. He was on his way to Doc Mackay's Three in a Box spread. A chill eagerness seethed inside him as he thought of the coming showdown.

His face was calm as he rode along, but his mind was in a turmoil. He was remembering that night, three years ago, when his partner, Tumbleweed Smith, who was now Doc Mackay, had doublecrossed him.

He made a disgusted sound deep in his throat, remembering how he'd trusted Tumbleweed. He had told himself his partner was too square and honest for the owlhoot. Tumbleweed had been a medico before circumstantial evidence railroaded him into a prison term for a robbery he didn't commit.

Abilene had met him after Tumbleweed's release from Yuma. The two of them teamed up. Their dark trail partnership was seven months old on the night they rode into San Carlos. The Kid had been Ab Seldon, outlaw, then.

They lost a lot of money in a crooked game at Dice Gunther's notorious *Gold Palace* gambling-hell. When they called Gunther for cheating, three

house gamblers stuck guns in their backs and threw them out of the place. Tumbleweed blamed Ab for their predicament.

"We had enough money to quit outlawing," he complained. "But you talked me into having one more fling, buying drinks and bucking a game at Gunther's. Now we're broke."

"Stop beefin'," Ab had said. "We'll get it back."

That night they climbed through a window into the office of the *Gold Palace*. Ab's educated fingers opened the safe. Tumbleweed was stuffing the loot into a burlap sack when a door burst open and Dice Gunther appeared with a scattergun.

Ab Seldon's first shot brought him down. Then hell broke loose. Men came running. Gunther, firing from the floor, kept Ab busy until the building was surrounded. Tumbleweed wasn't much help in the melee that followed. Guntalk always scared him stiff, made him too paralyzed to shoot straight. Ab fought like a demon. Again and again his own particular brand of Apache warwhoop flung defiance at the besiegers.

Suddenly, he missed his partner. Tumbleweed was gone. So was the bag of loot. Ab ran to a side window in time to see his partner, mounted, flash past and disappear down an alley. Lone-handed, wounded, Ab fought on, cursing Tumbleweed's infamy. He was halfway out of a window when somebody brought the muzzle of a shotgun down across his knuckles with a bone-splintering crash.

With the broken hand dangling useless at his left side, he ran a hot-lead gauntlet to his horse. Hours later, weak from half a dozen wounds, he fell from his blood-soaked kak. He would have died out there in the hills if Juan Flores, a Mexican goat herder, hadn't found him and nursed him back to life.

Now, as he rode away from Mesita, the Abilene Kid looked down at his maimed left hand, a hand that was twisted, crippled permanently. Never again would it hold a gun. That brought down Abilene's chances for a long life just exactly half. And that wasn't all. He couldn't hold his bronc's reins with that hand. He couldn't feed himself with it or pull on his clothes. He couldn't do a damned thing with it. Abilene would never get over the humiliation of being partially helpless. He had been a two-gunman. Now he carried one gun. And he was a cripple.

With all the bitterness in him, he cursed Tumbleweed Smith. If Tumbleweed hadn't left him to fight his way out alone, this wouldn't have happened. Two of them could have held the lawmen off so that they would never have gotten in close enough for hand-to-hand fighting. Abilene would have a strong left hand instead of a withered, nerveless thing that was worse than no hand at all. And if Tumbleweed hadn't run off with the money, Abilene would have plenty for that operation he needed on his back without earning it all over again with blood and lead.

He chuckled mirthlessly as he thought how nearly Tumbleweed had come to escaping his vengeance-dealing gun. Abilene had been on the lookout for Tumbleweed for three long years. Now, by a lucky accident, he knew where to find him, could settle the score between them. It seemed that fate was stepping in to help him play this sinister game.

The Kid hipped in his saddle, peered along his backtrail, listening. Then he faced around. It was thunder, not hoofbeats he'd heard, he decided.

The roar of gunfire came from behind. Abilene, jerked upright in the kak by a slug between his shoulder-blades, twisted around to face his ambusher. Dropping the reins, he snatched his gun free of leather, sent lead crashing at a moving shadow back there in the brush fringing the creek.

"Jack Posson," he muttered. "Fol-

lowed me to collect for his brother's killin'."

A cry of pain indicated he had struck a flesh-and-blood target. The dim bulk of a horse and rider plunged into the trail, hurtled back toward town. Flame streaked the night as the rider sent lead crashing at Abilene.

Abilene's bronc was bolting now. The Kid couldn't reach the reins he'd dropped. He couldn't do anything but hang on to all the leather he could find, to keep from falling off. The jolting sickened him. He wanted to fall in the trail and lie there, anything to stop the agony which held him, but instead, he clung to the kak, his face gray with pain.

He lost track of time, distance. Lightning danced in crazy arcs before his dimming eyes. Then the rain came. Presently Abilene felt himself plunging down into thick blackness. Mud oozed against his face, squeezed up between his outstretched fingers. Then he no longer felt the cold, the wet. He didn't feel anything.

THE ABILENE KID opened his eyes. A straight furrow of perplexity divided his forehead as he stared around the room. His chest was one big ache, and he felt weak as a kitten. Dimly he remembered an endless interlude of pain and darkness.

He saw the girl, then. A pretty, bright-haired girl with eyes as blue as a summer sky. She smiled. Abilene's stern lips softened a little, and a strange new warmth seemed to flow around his heart, driving out some of the coldness bred there by hate and contempt.

"You'll be all right now," the girl said in a low, pleasant voice. "My husband found you out on our east range, with a bullet wound in your lung. He operated, cut out the bullet. That was nearly a week ago."

The warmth receded from around Abilene's heart. His face changed. "Yore husband?" he whispered. "Is he a doc?"

"Yes. Doctor Jim Mackay. I'm Nancy Mackay."

Abilene's eyes flamed. He wasn't going to accept help—any more help—from Doc Mackay. He must get out of here. He tried to sit up, but savage pain and an overpowering weakness chained him. The girl came quickly to his side, laid a firm hand on his shoulder.

"You must not move like that," she said urgently. "You might open the wound."

"I can't stay here," Abilene muttered, not looking at her. "I'm ridin' on."

Nancy Mackay frowned at him as she would at a wilful child. "You're staying," she said. "If you tried to leave now, you'd die of hemorrhage, or maybe get pneumonia. Please don't argue. I won't leave this room until you drop off to sleep."

The Kid turned his face to the wall. He knew he was too weak to get out of bed without assistance. It was a hell of a situation, being here in Doc Mackay's house, but he'd have to make the best of it.

The next time Abilene awoke, he felt a little stronger. He wondered how long he had been asleep, but he didn't ask Nancy Mackay about that. Strangely enough, he was content to lie there and watch this vibrant, tanned ranch girl come and go as she moved about her work. Once she led a shy, tow-headed button into the room. She told Abilene the button was her son, Jimmy Mackay. It wasn't until Jimmy stumbled against a chair that the Kid realized that the boy was blind.

AS THE DAYS passed, Abilene cursed more and more the fate which kept him here. Hell, if he stayed much longer, obediently swallowing the things Nancy Mackay brought him to eat, following her and the button with his eyes every time

[*Turn To Page* 114]

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they came into the room, he might go soft. He might forget that Mackay was a doublecrosser and must pay a doublecrosser's price.

The Abilene Kid told the Mackays his name was Tex. They accepted that without comment, asked him no questions. He saw very little of Doc Mackay. Mackay was a typical, harassed country doctor, worn and tired from overwork and insufficient sleep. But it was something more than overwork which was etching those haggard, bitter lines around the young medico's grim lips, Abilene decided. Doc Mackay was terribly worried about something. His wife was worried too. More than once, Abilene noticed a discouraged droop to her sensitive mouth, the suspicion of tears in her blue eyes.

The Kid was relieved to see that Mackay didn't recognize him. That would come later, he told himself grimly, when Mackay would find himself looking into the muzzle of The Kid's forty-five. Sometimes The Kid would be thinking about that when young Jimmy came into the room and grinned at him. Then The Kid would feel guilty and ashamed, in spite of himself. He liked the kid a hell of a lot.

And Jimmy liked him too. Whenever the button listened to The Kid's voice, there was a light of adoration in his small face that made Abilene ache with regret of the kind of a life he had led—a life which set him apart from people like Nancy Mackay and Jimmy.

Then, one night Abilene awoke to hear low voices beyond a closed door.

"I can't get a loan anywhere," Doc Mackay was saying. "I've got no security to offer. The ranch is mortgaged to the hilt now."

Abilene heard a chair scrape back, heard footsteps pacing back and forth, then Mackay's voice again.

"I tell you, it's driving me crazy, Nance. One thousand dollars would pay for an operation that would make my boy see. One thousand—and I'm not man enough to get hold of it. I'm a failure.

"If I weren't, I'd be a successful surgeon now, with a big hospital back East. I'd be the kind of a surgeon who could operate on Jimmy and make him well. But all I am is a kind of glorified horse doctor, a dumb pill-thrower. I can't even earn a decent living for you and the boy. You'd be better off without me. You were getting along all right when you had that lunchroom job in town, before you married me—"

"Jim, stop it!" Nancy Mackay protested sharply. "Is it your fault if most of your patients are too poor to pay their bills? Is it your fault that Rance Bardell and his rustler crew are making all of us ranchers poor? Don't worry about the thousand, Jim. We'll get it, somehow—sometime."

"Sometime may be too late," Doc Mackay muttered. "If we wait too long, maybe the boy's eyes will be injured beyond repair. I'm going to get that money right away. I know a way to get it—"

"No, Jim," Nancy Mackay's voice cut in. "You promised you'd never step outside the law again. If anything should happen to you—I couldn't stand it. I love you so, Jim. I need you. And Jimmy needs you—"

THE ABILENE KID pulled the covers over his ears, but Nancy Mackay's voice seemed to vibrate through his brain ceaselessly, over and over: "I love you so, Jim—"

A fiery pain licked across The Kid's back. It was the old trouble again. That lawman's slug, killing him. Abilene told himself he couldn't put off that operation much longer. Maybe it was too late, even now, to hope for a cure He sat up. When his head cleared, he got out of bed, pulled on his clothes. He would leave now. He told himself he would have left long before this if he'd been able. It had been intolerable being in the same house with the Mackays.

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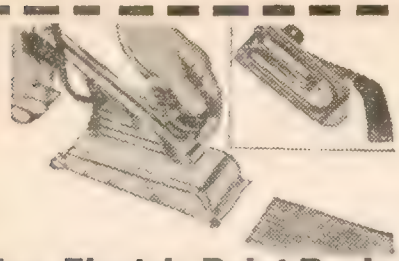

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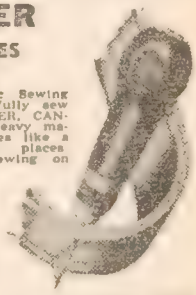

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But neither Nancy Mackay's kindness nor the fact that Doc Mackay had saved Abilene's life was going to change the Kid's plans any.

The Abilene Kid would show no mercy. Doc Mackay hadn't given a damn what happened to the Abilene Kid that night of gunflame and death in San Carlos!

Abilene told himself he was going to kill Doc Mackay. But not in front of Nancy Mackay and the button. Tonight, Abilene would ride into town. Tomorrow, when Mackay came to open up his office in Mesita, Abilene would meet him in a fair fight. Fair, but he knew how it would end. It would take a better man than Doc Mackay to match his gun-speed.

The Abilene Kid slipped outside and saddled his long-legged dun. He felt lightheaded, unsteady. Once in the kak, he reined southward through the night. His face was drawn, white. There was a great longing in him to get this gun-job over with so he could ride away—far from the legend of the Abilene Kid. With some of the money Bardell had given him he'd pay for that operation. Then he would hole up somewhere in the everlasting hills and live out the rest of his life in peace and contentment.

Against the glitter of the stars, he seemed suddenly to see the faces of Nancy Mackay and little Jimmy. All the long way into town he kept seeing them. And before the lights of Mesita emerged from the darkness, he knew beyond doubt that he couldn't make himself go through with the killing of Doc Mackay. Even though he hated the man.

"I hope Bardell blasts him to hell," he murmured through tight lips. "But me, if I gunned him I'd never have any peace, knowin' Nancy Mackay and the kid hated me—"

IT WAS past midnight when the Abilene Kid stepped into Rance Bardell's office. The big owner of the *Paradise* waited in silence for him to speak, his slitted eyes measuring, studying his visitor.

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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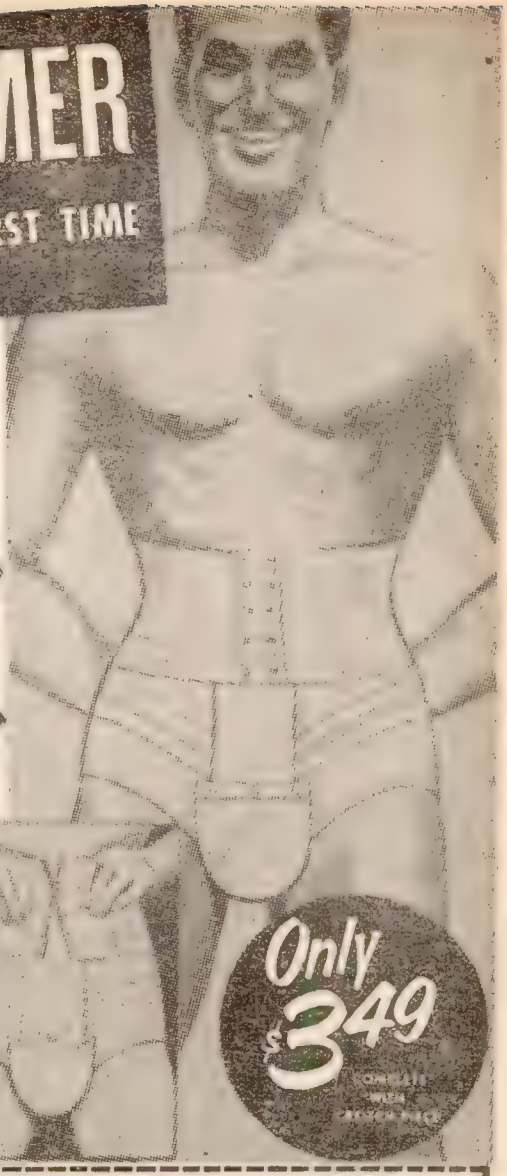

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Abilene took a roll of bills out of his pocket, threw the greenbacks on Bardell's desk. "Here's fifteen hundred bucks, half of what you paid me," he said. "I'm not killin' Mackay."

Bardell's eyes burned with tawny fires. "I know why you ain't goin' through with the job," he drawled. "You've gone soft because Mackay patched you up."

Sitting there behind his desk, with shoulders hunched forward, the saloonman looked like some big, lithe cat tensing for a pounce. "When I heard you was hurt, I decided the Mackay job couldn't wait until you got well," he went on. "I made other plans to get rid of the medico—plans that will go through tonight. There's a mass meeting here in town tomorrow and I don't want Mackay to be there with his vigilante talk—"

Bardell's arm moved from behind the desk. In his hand was a gun, leveled at Abilene. "I decided to get rid of you at the same time," he told the Kid smoothly. "I was goin' to send you to Boothill anyway, after you finished off Posson and the medico. But after you got shot up, I decided neither job could wait. I figgered to ride out to Mackay's and kill you both.

"But since you've blundered in here, I'll accommodate you right now."

The Abilene Kid's eyes glittered, green and strange. His voice came like the crackling of ice. "So you planned a doublecross all along, Bardell. And you lied about Mackay. He wasn't framin' you. He's been tellin' the truth. You're the kingpin back of the rustlin' here in the valley."

Bardell's teeth gleamed white in the lamplight. "That's correct, Kid," he chuckled. "I'll get back the money I paid you, all of it. And when I show the law it's the outlaw Ab Seldon, I've killed, I'll get the five thousand in bounty money on yore head—"

Abilene's eyes burned into Bardell's. "Don't pull trigger, polecat," he

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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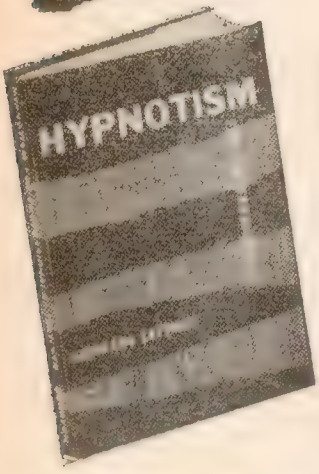

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warned. "I can guarantee to kill you before I pass in my checks."

Uncertainty flickered for a moment in Rance Bardell's eyes. His thumb, hooked over the gun hammer preparatory to cocking it, relaxed for an instant.

Then, abruptly, he let the gun drop, and his hands jerked up, palms forward. For, magically, there was a gun in Abilene's hand now, its muzzle pointed at the third button on Bardell's ornate shirt. Abilene came forward, leathering his gun as he came. He picked up the weapon Bardell had dropped.

"Stand up, hombre," he ordered.

Bardell stood. The Abilene Kid shoved the weapon into the saloonman's holster, then backed away.

"All right, doublecrosser," he said, smiling grimly. "Draw that cutter, and we'll see who sends who to Boothill."

BARDELL'S lips went white. He made no move for his sixshooter. Hope and desperation warred in his eyes as footsteps sounded on the stairway.

"Draw!" Abilene snapped viciously.

Bardell's hand slapped leather. At the same time he leaped aside to crouch behind his desk. And then gun-thunder filled the room. Lead whipped past the Abilene Kid from behind, and he whirled, saw a table-lookout standing in the doorway, squinting at him along the barrel of a scattergun. Bardell, sheltered behind the desk, was triggering now. One leap took Abilene to the side window. He scrambled out onto the low roof, dropped off the edge to the ground.

That exertion opened the wound in his chest. He could feel the wetness of the bandages. Feeling faint, he stumbled along the alley toward the Main Street. A few buildings to the left was the livery, where he'd left his horse. Abilene turned on Main Street. He coughed, wiped blood from his lips.

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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Weakness surged over him and he sank back against a shadowed wall.

He looked up as the soft clop clop of hoofs came along the moonlit street. Four riders drew up. Grim-looking men with hats low-drawn over their whiskered faces. Racking their broncs in front of the *Paradise,* they sat their saddles in silence, their hard-eyed glances fixed on the saloon batwings.

The doors swung open, and Rance Bardell strode out, his big face a-scowl. Turning to the gun-hung individual who was following him, he issued a swift order.

"Seldon had sneaked out of town by now. He'll probably hit for Apache Pass," Abilene heard him say. "Get some of the boys and head him off. And don't bring him back alive."

The man topped a horse and hurtled away.

"Let's get goin'," Bardell snapped at the riders waiting at the hitchrack.

Abilene watched him mount, lead the four men out of town. He saw them turn northward into the Angel Creek road, heading for Doc Mackay's ranch. He smiled grimly. Bardell would kill Mackay. Abilene told himself he was glad.

On lagging feet, he went and got his horse. As he rode out of town, he felt of the money in his pocket, and the bulk of it reassured him. He looked off to the west. There lay his gateway to freedom. Sun Pass, far to the west of the spot where the gunman-posse would be seeking him. He sighed. Now he could have that slug cut out of his back. Then he'd put away his gun forever and forget the men he had killed.

The Abilene Kid bowed his head. Could he ever forget those hollow-eyed ghosts? And could he ever forget those hollow-eyed ghosts? And could he ever forget young Jimmy Mackay, with his wide, sightless eyes? Or Nancy Mackay's earnest voice telling her husband how much she loved him?

Abilene tried not to look down the

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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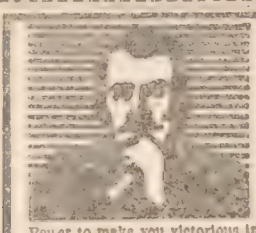

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road that Bardell and his men had taken. The distant pounding of hoofs was like a dirge in his ears. In a little while now, those killers would ride up to the Three in a Box. They'd call Mackay to the door, then they'd blast him. And Mackay's wife, his kid—would even they be safe from a callous devil like Bardell? Certainly not if they resisted him, Abilene knew.

But even if Bardell left them unmolested, what then? If Mackay died, the light of happiness would be gone from Nancy Mackay's eyes forever. She and Jimmy loved the medico. Nothing could change that. Abilene groaned deep in his throat. There was one way to insure the happiness of that clear-eyed girl and her little blind kid. The way of no-return—for Abilene.

He pulled up abruptly. For a moment he sat there, brooding. Then he wheeled his bronc, galloped after the five gunmen. Presently he turned off the road, took a short cut across the hills to the Three in a Box.

THE ABILENE KID stood in the shadow of a tall cottonwood and looked across at Doc Mackay's little ranch cabin, peaceful in the moonlight. There was a soft, dreamy light in Abilene's eyes, a light that vanished as he heard hoofbeats. When Rance

Bardell and his men rode up, Abilene walked out to meet them.

"This is my party, Bardell," he rasped. "Come and get it!"

Bardell ripped out a startled oath, clawed at his holsters. "Get him, boys!" he yelled. "Get the dirty—"

The roar of Abilene's gun cut him short. One of the horsebackers turned tail, spurred away in a panic. When Bardell screamed, slid backward over his bronc's rump and crashed to the ground, a second gunman, triggering a pair of wild shots at Abilene laid low on his kak pommel and quirted his bronc back the way he had come.

The third gunnie was pouring a hail of lead at Abilene. The Kid staggered as a hot slug tore at his hip and another ploughed through his shoulder. His lips writhed back and a yell of defiance burst from him. His own particular brand of Apache war whoop, trademark of Ab Seldon, outlaw.

Then he felt the smashing impact of a slug in his chest. Bardell had triggered that shot, was up on one knee, blood pouring from his neck. The Abilene Kid, sagging slowly, felt his gun buck twice more. Bardell's companion sprawled on the ground in an inert heap. Bardell stiffened, toppled backward. Abilene saw the big gunman's face in the moonlight, the expression of hate and surprise on it. He saw the oozing bullet-hole between the staring eyes as Bardell crashed to earth.

Abilene was on the ground now, too. He couldn't see very well. He heard voices, footsteps. Then they were standing over him—Doc Mackay, Nancy and Jimmy. There was terror, grief in the button's face as he knelt, groped for Abilene's hand.

"Are yuh hurt bad—Tex?" Jimmy gulped, his small hand trembling in Abilene's big one.

The Abilene Kid managed to sit up. He saw Doc Mackay staring at him. "That Apache yell," Doc stammered.

[*Turn Page*]

To The Man With

HERNIA

Who Can Not Submit To Surgery

The man condemned to live with rupture, all too often faces a grim future.

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"I'd know it anywhere. You—you're Ab Seldon."

Nancy Mackay's face was white, tearstained. "Carry him into the house," she implored.

Abilene shook his head. "I got to be goin'," he said. "There's a posse after me—"

He got to his feet, went over to his tied horse. Doc Mackay followed him. Abilene heard the medico's voice, telling him what a fine thing he'd done. That made a bitter smile curl the Kid's lips.

"Yeah?" he said for Doc's ears alone. "I done this for yore wife and kid. I wouldn't give you a drink in Hades after the way you double-crossed me in San Carlos—lit out with the money that was half mine—"

Doc Mackay grasped his arm. "Hell, Ab! I didn't run away with the money. Before I crawled through that window I threw the sack aside. I was scared. That's why I ran. I admit I was a damned coward, Ab. I always was, when the guns began to talk. You know that—"

Abilene, in the kak now, looked down at the medico, smiled wanly. He was glad, very glad he hadn't let Doc Mackay be killed. No one but the devil himself would punish a man for being afraid, he told himself.

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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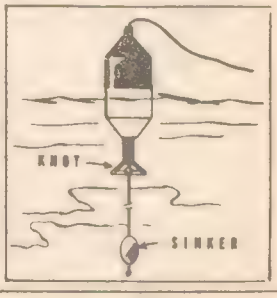

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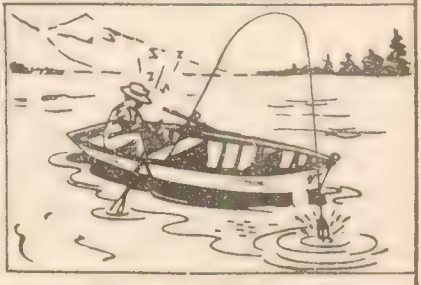

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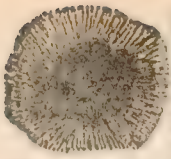

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"It's okay, partner," he murmured. "It might have happened to anybody. I'm sorry I judged you wrong. I should've known you didn't take the money."

As in a dream, Abilene felt Nancy Mackay's gentle fingers on his arm, heard Jimmy sobbing, pleading with him to stay. But he knew he couldn't stay, and he knew he'd never be coming back. He leaned down and put a kindly hand on Jimmy's tow head.

"Don't fret, button," he said huskily. "I'll see you again—someday. Just now the hills are callin' me."

Out of his pocket, Abilene pulled the money he had collected from Bardell, fifteen hundred dollars. "This's for Jimmy, to make his eyes well again," he said, handing the money to Doc Mackay.

The medico's face looked bewildered in moonlight. He protested, but Abilene was adamant. The medico gripped Abilene's hand hard then, and his eyes showed the gratitude that he couldn't express in words. The Abilene Kid wheeled the dun mare, rode away. Soft on the breeze he could hear Nancy Mackay's goodbye. "God bless you, Tex," he heard her say.

The Abilene Kid forgot his pain. The suggestion of a smile touched his stern lips. He had no regrets. His smile deepened. He was thinking of the gratitude in Doc Mackay's eyes, the gentleness of Nancy Mackay's goodbye. And he was thinking of a little, blind button who would some day come out of the darkness into the light.

The Abilene Kid, through heavy lids, gazed up ahead at the rolling outline of Mustang Range, black against the starry sky. The high places were calling him—where a man could die with the sage-clean wind in his face, the brooding shadows of the ageless hills to stand sentinel for him at the gates of eternity.

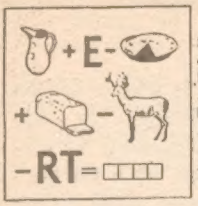
★

ANSWERS to the Western Brain-Mixers

1. Sam Bass. As a youth he migrated from Indiana to be an Indian-fighter. Upon arriving West he saw seven freighters who had been killed by Indians. The sight of these naked twisted corpses impressed young Bass with the idea that Indian-fighting was a profession for specialists, and not a good field for amateurs. He got a job as handyman with W. F. Eagan, sheriff of Denton County, Texas.
2. Buckskin Frank Leslie. Often he would stand his wife against the parlor wall, and, with the neatness of a pencil drawing, outline her figure with bullets, in rapid firing, fired from across the room. Generally a portrait of this kind required several boxes of cartridges.
3. Spring.
4. No.
5. Wyatt Earp arrived in the silver mining camp of Tombstone, Arizona, December 1, 1879.
6. True.
7. In cattle brands a short rail is called a "bar." A tilted rail is called a "slash."
8. Nevada.
9. Curly Bill was Arizona's most famous outlaw. A medieval robber baron in the red flannel shirt and black Stetson of just an ordinary cowboy, he fooled many of his victims by his good looks and honest face.
10. Dutch Annie was a figure of the red-light society and, when she died in Tombstone, Arizona, she was deeply mourned over. A thousand carriages followed her body to the graveyard.
11. The "Cherokee Strip" was named that name because it was ceded to the Cherokee Indians by the United States government in order to provide them with an outlet from their larger reservation farther east to their summer hunting grounds in the Rockies. Also the hills of the Strip and the hills of the Osage provided outlaw hiding places for three decades. These hills were the home of the Dalton Boys and other notorious outlaw gangs.
12. True.
13. Any five of the following: Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday, Mysterious Dave Mather, Charlie Bassett, Bill Tilghman, Luke Short, Ben Thompson, Clay Allison, Shotgun Collins, Ben Daniels, and Neil Brown.
14. The cowboys would have to check the cattle in the rear immediately and a "point" rider would have to force his horse into the midst of the panic-stricken cattle, break the mill, and compel some of the cattle to lead off in swimming for the shore.
15. The famous 101 Ranch of Texas is said to have once contained 172 sections of land.
16. Buffalo meat is not like beef. It is dark red in color and of coarse fiber, like mutton.
17. Hair-side out, though of course the hair has been removed in tanning.
18. Eat them. They're popular Mexican dishes.
19. Bat Masterson killed his first man at Sweetwater, Texas, over a dancehall girl, when he was only eighteen years old.

★

Can You Solve These 3 Puzzles?



No. 1

Solution is one of last names below:
Johann E. BODE
Henry FORD
Alice CARY
Alexander G. BELL
Johann S. BACH
William PACA

No. 2

Solution is one of last names below:
Robert BURNS
John BROWN
Ethan ALLEN
Alfred E. SMITH
H. G. WELLS
Sigmund FREUD

No. 3

Solution is one of last names below:
John GAY
Will H. LOW
Walter MAP
Edgar W. NYE
Robert E. LEE
Samuel J. WAY

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In this way you will get a taste of the enjoyment and challenge presented in the puzzles of this contest. And as to the thrill of winning, can't you yourself imagine what it would be like to win $50,000.00, $10,000.00, $7,500.00 or any other of the cash prizes shown at the right! This may indeed be the opportunity you've been waiting for!

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Name.....

Address.....

Puzzle No. 1 _____

Puzzle No. 2 _____

Puzzle No. 3 _____

This SAMPLE PUZZLE Will Give You the Idea!

Before trying to solve Puzzles 1, 2 and 3 above, let's solve this Sample Puzzle:

Note the various letters and objects, and the plus and minus signs. C plus OWL plus EYE plus TANK ... gives us COWLEYETANK. Next, minus TOWEL minus CAN means that from COWLEYETANK we take away the letters TOWELCAN, leaving YEK.

Now, in the list of names under the puzzle, we see the last name of Francis Scott KEY, and by re-arranging the letters Y E K to K E Y, we have KEY as the correct solution to this puzzle.

SOLUTION IS ONE OF LAST NAMES BELOW:
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Robert E. LEE
Peter PAN
Francis Scott KEY
Edgar Allan POE
Franz ABT

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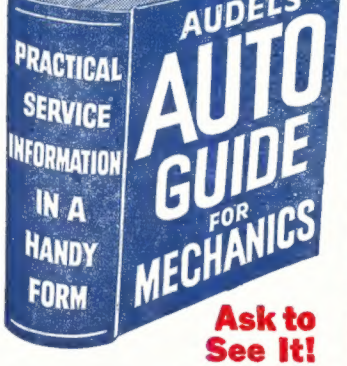

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